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ride to hell

Open-world gaming hits the open road

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what moves you

Big turkey

Forgive the truncated last-minute short-and-to-the-point editorial this month. My excuse is that I really didn't like what I originally wrote—that storytelling in games is kind of broken—and came away from Thanksgiving with a much better vision—the kind of vision that can only come from eating till you want to puke and drinking wine till you want to puke twice.

It was a good time, filled mostly with movies and games with a very motley group of friends. I'd yet to really see the power of the Wii society in action, but on this day, my eyes were opened. Imagine several people peeling and grating and shaking with the Wii remote. And screaming with delight. The game of the moment was Cooking Mamma. It was a blast. It was, um, casual. The day simply wouldn't have been as pleasurable without the Wii in action, but I walked away realizing: none of us will ever play that game ever again. At least not for another year. But I guess it doesn't matter, the Wii did its job in the moment, and that's just perfectly OK.

After Cooking Mamma, it was suggested that we play Wii Sports. I had to chuckle, tickled by my ADHD gaming habits; I'm not used to someone asking if I'd like to play a

two-year-old game. I'm used to the gamer who is barely able to remember what came out two months ago while moving on to the next big AAA hit.

The Wii certainly does have its place, but I continue to wonder: are we going to be playing Wii Sports and Cooking Mamma next year, and then the next? Are Wii people gonna keep buying games like us 360 and PS3 carnivores?

It's old news but I'm gonna whine anyways: Nintendo really isn't catering to me anymore, and they may never again. So be it. I understand why; witness Thanksgiving.

After dinner and more wine, it was time to chill out, which meant movie time was replacing the Wii experience. The Matrix came on, and everyone was glued. The Matrix is genuinely good science fiction, its ideas and revolutionary technique are a rush to the imagination. It really got me thinking: why isn't there more science fiction in gamemaking, or at least more good science fiction? Look at Halo, lapping up sales. Fallout 3 is blowing people's minds. I want my mind blown more, dammit! And military games simply do not cut it. Realism doesn't cut it. Games really are at their best when you're in worlds that

“After Cooking Mamma, it was suggested that we play Wii Sports.”

are an exciting extension of fantasy beyond our own. I just think the marketing idea of what gamers really want isn't that accurate. Like the Matrix, we simply want something that has a fresh vision and high-level craft. Sales, for the most part, will follow. That's not necessarily easy to pull off, but if more people were given the green light to try, things would be different.

Happy holidays everyone. If you have a Wii, enjoy the fact that you can bring the family together. We may not all like it, but in enough ways Nintendo is doing something right.

Brady Fiechter

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Jump in.

 **XBOX 360.**

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Game Industry Makes the Grade

Parents, not the gaming industry: the reason for all of world's woes

The National Institute on Media and the Family, a conservative media watchdog group, has for the past 13 years been issuing a report card on how they see the video game industry when it comes to making sure violent and inappropriate video games don't fall into the hands of youngsters. Their most recent report card has just hit, and to the surprise of many, the group had a very positive outlook on the state of video games, giving the industry three As and a B+ in reference to the efforts of the ESRB, retailers, and video game console manufacturers.

Who didn't get a passing grade this year? Parents! That's right, it's the parents who are now receiving the blame, as it seems that they aren't making the most of things such as the ESRB ratings or the new set of parental controls found in all of the major consoles.

The group also issued their lists of games parents should avoid this holiday season, and those that are recommended for the under-17 gamers. The "Games to Avoid" were *Blitz: The League II*, *Dead Space*, *Fallout 3*, *Far Cry 2*, *Gears of Wars 2*, *Legendary*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Resistance 2*, *Saints Row 2*, and *Silent Hill: Homecoming*. What was given approval? *Guitar Hero World Tour*, *Rock Band 2*, *Rock Revolution*, *Spider-Man: Web of Shadows*, and *Shaun White Snowboarding*. What, no *Animal Crossing*?



"Who didn't get a passing grade this year? Parents!"

The Lich King's Wrath Spreads Far and Wide

Shocking News: People Love World of Warcraft



There's a good chance that many of you out there reading this have picked up the latest expansion to the massively massive MMORPG World of Warcraft, the Northrend-focused World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King. A very good chance, actually, as the expansion sold more than 2.8 million copies in its first 24 hours of availability. That number is actually better than what World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, the game's first expansion, sold when it launched in January of last year. (That total was nearly 2.4 million copies.) In fact, those twenty-four hours of sales have already made Lich King the best-selling PC title of 2008 for game retailer GameStop, as well as one of its best-selling titles for 2008 period. It's also of interest to note that those numbers come with the expansion not yet debuting in some regions, China for one.

And, if all of this weren't enough, shortly before the launch of Lich King, Blizzard announced that WoW's subscriber population broke the 11 million player mark. So, it seems that whole World of Warcraft thing is doing okay for Blizzard, if making truckloads of cash is your thing.

PSP Parties Online in Japan

PSP Ad-hoc Party software enters beta testing

Japan, ever getting great gaming gifts before us Westerners, got a special little something from Sony in early November: the beta release of the PSP Ad-hoc Party software. What this does, in case you aren't familiar with the idea, is let your PS3 act as a network bridge for the PSP, giving games that previously only had local multiplayer the option for playing versus online. For multiplayer lovers everywhere, it's a step that could end up having a huge potential effect in the PSP gaming scene.

For the beta release, the only game that was claimed by Sony Computer Entertainment to be officially supported was Japanese juggernaut Monster Hunter Portable 2nd G. However, eager PSP owners found a number of other titles that worked just fine with the beta software, such as *Final Fantasy Tactics*, *Street Fighter Zero 3*, *Tekken DR*, and *Wipeout Pulse*.

So, when will us non-Japanese folks get the chance to have our own party with Ad-hoc Party? That, unfortunately, remains a very good question. Hopefully, SCEA won't keep us out of the party for too long.

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Gaming is a Drain

We gamers are electricity hogs, at least if you're to go off the tone of a recent analysis by the Natural Resources Defense Council and Ecos Consulting, which states that our hardware here in the States consumes about as much electricity for the year as the entire city of San Diego, CA. According to the data, as much as half of us are believed to leave our consoles on for extensive periods of time when we aren't playing, further compounding the energy drain problem. Not surprisingly, the PS3 is the biggest offender, costing on average as much as 160 bucks a year to run. The study suggests that with more functional sleep systems and whatnot, we could save as much as a billion dollars annually. Think of what you could do with that money—like invest in GM or something!

Wii Skin

Next time your grandmother or mother or whoever it is that's supposed to be the new audience for the Nintendo Wii comes over for a little gaming action, we highly recommend impressing them even more with these lovely skins from artist Dean Yeagle, courtesy of 247Skins.com.



Faith is free-to-play

Mirror's Edge goes 2D as a free online game

The internet has produced a wide plethora of amazing Flash-based games, but we really have to tip our hats to Mirror's Edge 2D. Put together by Brad Borne, Mike Swain, Mike Castro, Mike Miller, and Mark Spenner, ME2D does an amazing job of capturing the look and feel of the actual Mirror's Edge game. Even though this is a keyboard-controlled, 2D experience, you control Faith as she sprints along rooftops, runs up walls, slides under obstacles, hangs on for dear life, and everything else you'd expect from a Mirror's Edge experience. Even better, Mirror's Edge 2D is being put together with the blessing of Electronic Arts themselves. As of this writing, the game is currently in beta, with only one level available so far, but the creators not only promise more levels but even additional features such as online leaderboards. If you want to check out the game (either in its beta form, or to find out where to play the full game, depending on where they're at in the creation process when you read this), hit up Brad Borne's website at <http://www.bornegames.com/>.



THE GAMING CLICHÉ SPOTTER GUIDE

QUICK TIME EVENTS

As development budgets skyrocket, studios fall under the delusion that they are making something *more* than a mere game. With all the scripted events and cut-scenes, the players aren't actually allowed to *play*, lest they ruin the vision of the designers. The token gesture that this is not the case is the condescending instruction to "Push this sequence of buttons to continue". How severely is your game plagued by this most contemporary chore?



The game contains no QTEs at all. Game-play is for gaming, cut-scenes are for watching and the two never meet.

CUT-SCENE ENGAGED.
You MAY NOW RELAX
YOUR THUMBS.



■ 500pts

When the QTEs kick in, there are no instructions on screen because the moves that are expected of the player at this point mimic those that are employed throughout the rest of the game. The button combination is instinctive and the transition between true game-play and QTE is seamless.



■ 100pts

QTEs are used in the traditional manner for special moves in-game, usually a dramatic, killing blow. They jar with the rest of the action and subvert any immersion that may have developed, but failure does not lead to instant death; merely a failure to land a strike.



■ 50pts

The QTEs demand that the player hit an utterly random combination of buttons with no reflection or relevance to the control system used throughout the rest of the game. Failure means death and a long wait to restart. Additional points are lost if the animated sequence preceding the required button-mash exceeds 10 seconds.



■ 5pts



Midnight Club: LA Remix



Star Wars: The Force Unleashed



LEGO Batman: The Videogame



Hot Shots Golf: Open Tee® 2



FIFA 09



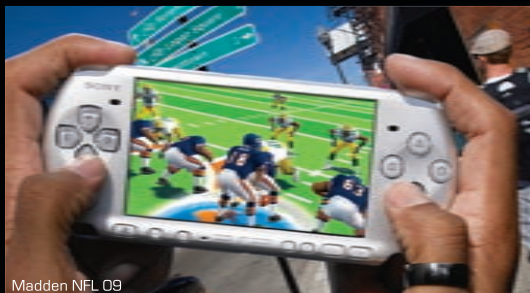
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Ben 10: Alien Force



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(((Developer Sound Off)))

Life can be kinda funny. I say this because it's as much about getting what you want as it is banging your head against a wall of ignorance and intrigue in a slow, stubborn attempt to figure out what the f**k you wanted in the first place.

For example, I've had a digital Diggler to make games for as long as I can remember. While countless kids were dreaming of courtrooms or spaceships or game seven grand slams, I was doing level design documents and character back-stories for lameass contests in *Nintendo Power* and writing the latest and greatest dungeon adventure for my dice-dealing buddies.

The sad thing is . . . well, the sad thing is how impossibly nerdy that sounded, but the topic of the day centers around the fact that after nearly 10 years and as many titles shipped, I *still* joke about how I want to make games when I grow up.

Doesn't make sense, you say?

Well, see, that's the thing. And while we all agree that spoilers are a bitch, I'm going to be the asshole who yells out that Bruce Willis is a ghost during the opening credits:

The Iffy Art of Building a Better Mousetrap

words Brandon Justice

"A hard notion to swallow in the face of 14 more FPS frag-fests..."

You, too, can get into the games industry. If you're bright and passionate and diligent and all that stuff, there's even a good chance that you can work on games you actually like. But ultimately, no matter how awesome your ideas are, chance are slimmer than the average booth babe's backside that your game-changing, industry altering experience of ultimate awesome will ever even get the opportunity to be rejected.

In short, signing up to be a game designer is something like enlisting as George W. Bush's grammar guru. It sounds high profile enough, and ought to provide opportunity for success, but at the end of the day, you're limited by a lack of interest in self-improvement.

Put simply, the stakeholders in the games industry don't exactly value ideas.

Sure, sure . . . the good ones value people. The aggressive ones value technology. And no matter how

badly they screw themselves, the clever ones continue to value the power of the lowest common denominator. But ideas?

Please.

Those, my friend are a dime a dozen.

A hard notion to swallow in the face of 14 more FPS frag-fests, a same-old suite of sad sequels and the uneventful arrival of *Sports Game 20XX: The Roster Update*, but almost any veteran game developer will tell you this without batting an eyelash.

This has as much to do with the number of times their brain-babies have been bested by the boot of some green-light guerrilla who doesn't even own a console as it does the fact that they know that said ideas are only as good as the planning, people and production values through which that idea becomes an experience.

And I buy that much. I've had the opportunity to work in a variety of distinctly development environments. The difference between them is enough to illustrate the old adage that there is a right and a wrong way to do anything, and in our industry, we stumble as much as we sprint.

Yup. Making games is all sorts of difficult, and many maintain that our industry's lack of real developers is as much the issue as our quiet creative crisis, but personally, I think the issue goes deeper than that.

For instance, let's talk for a moment about employee agreements. From hapless port-houses to some of industry's largest publishers, many companies in the industry actually require their employees to preemptively sign away the rights to any creative endeavor they enter into during the term of their employment.

Some are even so prohibitive that *any idea* you come

up with, whether it's a video game idea or a cookbook for egg aficionados; whether you thought up at the office or on your own time with your own equipment—it becomes the exclusive property of your employer.

What's more interesting is that, unlike other industries with comparable creative process, it's permanent. There's no expiration date on their ownership. No tie to the idea's actual production. No additional compensation of any sort. No mandatory game credit. No lock that you'll even get a free copy of the game, let alone get to work on it.

None.

Makes you want to start submitting every good game idea you've ever had, doesn't it?

Granted, these folks pay your salary, and as a designer, part of your job is to generate ideas for mass consumption. Even with prohibitive policies like this, I've offered up dozens of concepts in the faint hope that maybe they'd make it, but that sort of thing is the exception, not the rule.

The truth is, the majority of folks in this business refuse to even risk it. They aren't about to lose the one reason they got into this industry to chance. Instead, they sit on their ideas, good and bad, and we get stuck playing whatever's left.

I dunno how that makes you feel, but personally, I think it's all sorts of unfortunate. I think it's nice to hear companies talk about how they're trying to innovate, how they're trying to encourage the development of new IPs, how they want us to mature as an industry, but if game companies genuinely expect folks to toss the concepts nearest and dearest to their hearts to a firing squad that routinely illustrates its inability to identify worthwhile concepts, then someone out there ought to consider facilitating a less prohibitive system of checks

Brandon Justice hopes this year's elections weren't a big bummer. Feel free to e-mail your ballot-based banter to bjustice@playhard.net.

and balances.

For starters, if you don't want the idea, then don't keep it. If you actually make use of an idea, have the good sense to encourage more like it by providing reasonable compensation for the work that generates millions of dollars in revenue for your business. Or maybe you could consider something completely crazy like a formalized process similar to the movie industry. Some companies are serious about these sorts of things, but they are few and far between.

For the good of games, this *has* to change.

Now, I've been told by a couple studio heads that the legal implications are such that these sorts of thing are "impossible," but, umm . . . again, Hollywood seems to manage. Further, folks who provide this sort of service to a film house or music label make a good deal of money in the process. It can't be *that* different in games.

It just can't...

Look, all this is to say that no matter what the clone war erupting at your local game retailer seems to indicate, I've had enough drunken conversations with other game-makers to know that there are a near-endless array of money-making ideas out there.

As such, I can't help but think that, as an industry, we clearly have a problem getting them into production.

And yeah, we can continue to crawl and claw towards a real leap in innovation, or we can start systematically encouraging the creative leaps we so desperately need through proven progressive, mutually beneficial tactics that will yield results in ways our target audience can only dream about.

Personally, I find that notion much more appealing than finding a way to copy whatever the other guy is doing, don't you?

It's certainly something to think about.

playback
letters@playmagazine.com

Long-time subscriber here. I won't bore you with the same clichés of how much I love your mag, blah blah blah. The compliments are in place and I'll leave it at that.

As much as I would like to complain about how dull, boring, and lifeless the 360's new menus are, and how much of a waste of money it was for me to buy themes and not be able to enjoy them as I previously did, I won't... wait, I just did.

No, the purpose of my letter is to ask in the most serious manner: "WTF is up with gaming clichés and why don't people demand more?"

There are terrible trends in games that simply need to stop, and what's more, is that they are becoming more and more recurrent in games. Halo 3, Gears of War (1&2), Resistance (1&2), Hellgate . . . ah hell, the list goes on, but you can lump too many games in there.

Common problems: Completely unoriginal dialogue from background characters ripped right out of movies like Aliens or Predator.

Main characters with voices that are the audible illegitimate love child of James Earl Jones and Lemmy Kilmister.

For a period of 2 years, it seemed as if every action game had the same commercial, beginning with something like, "They destroyed my family/city/planet/whatever." Ending with something similar to, "I'm going to make them pay."

Characters who are unrealistically proportioned - being 6'6" tall and 8 feet wide.

Of course, let's not forget how so many games sound

as if their story draftsmen are 14 year-olds who can't stop masturbating long enough to read a book, and have the most mindless taste in movies.

I place the blame on the consumer—if people demanded a higher standard and didn't buy the game, the developers would follow suit. Instead it seems as if the developers make the standard and the consumers devour it unquestionably.

Maybe I'm just "getting old," maybe I just tire of the clichés before most people, or maybe I'm just a harsh critic.

Regardless, I still want to know—if gamers are growing up, then why aren't the games (and I don't mean in terms of violence or sexual content)? Why is the same crap marketed to us? Why do we still consume it? Why can't we have a more complicated protagonist?

Oh wait, I forgot...because people are cattle. Sorry, Play. I answered my own question.

So I'll direct it towards the consumer in hopes that you publish this letter:

People... do you really enjoy having your intelligence insulted by this crap? We could very well be in the middle of the "Golden Age" of gaming, and when we could be feasting on suckling pig, you think a Wendy's burger is good enough.

Players! Demand more from your games! Don't allow mediocrity to be the norm! Games will always be "pretty," so why settle for that?

Thank you,
Craig

"Oh wait, I forgot...because people are cattle."



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Number of Hardware Units Sold: October 2008

06	PlayStation 2	136K
05	PlayStation 3	190K
04	PSP	193K
03	Xbox 360	371K
02	Nintendo DS	491K
01	Wii	803K

Select quotes from analyst Anita Frazier for the month of October

"The video games industry grew an impressive 18% year-over-year in the first month of the critical fourth quarter. With 10-months under its belt, the video games industry is still poised to top \$22B in annual sales in 2008."

"The sales results are mixed this month, however. The console portion of the market made significant gains at 26% across hardware, software and accessories, while the portable side of the market stalled, declining 14%. Year-to-date the portable segment of the market is still up 7%."

"The PS3 realized the greatest year-over-year monthly unit sales increase at 57%."

"The expanding variety of content available for consumers to play is clearly paying off for the industry. Looking at the top 10 games for the month, half are "M" rated games while the other half are "E" rated games and they span disparate genres. There is something for everyone on this list"

Top 10 Video Games Sold: October 2008

(includes CE, GOTY editions, bundles, etc. but not those bundled with hardware)

01	360 FABLE II	MICROSOFT	790K
02	WII FIT W/ BALANCE BOARD	NIN	487K
03	360 FALLOUT 3	BETHESDA SOFTWAREWORKS	375K
04	WII MARIO KART W/ WHEEL	NINTENDO	290K
05	WII PLAY W/ REMOTE	NINTENDO	282K
06	360 SAINTS ROW 2	THQ	270K
07	PS3 SOCOM: U.S. NS CONFRONTATION	SONY	231K
08	PS3 LITTLE BIG PLANET	SONY	215K
09	360 NBA 2K9	TAKE 2 INTERACTIVE	202K
10	360 DEAD SPACE	ELECTRONIC ARTS	193K



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play Gaming Culture

words Evan Shamoon

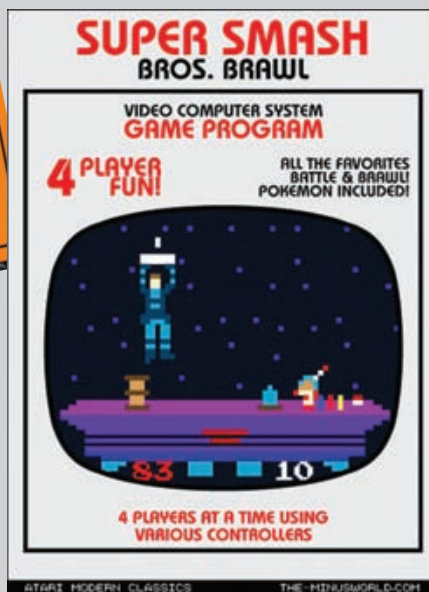
SUPERMANDOLINI

Looking for some décor to help nerd up your life a little bit? Look no further than the bastion of awesome that is Supermandolini. The online boutique carries an array of gaming related products, ranging from Console Wars Veteran pins to celebrate your years spent outside the line of fire (available in both NES and PlayStation varieties), to a “wired up” t-shirt. The Arcade button buttons will dress up any outfit, and our personal favorite is the Soft Sector floppy disc coasters that will bring you back to the days of VGA gaming. Beware, you’re going to want to own everything on here. <http://www.supermandolini.com/>



ATARI 2600 REINTERPRETATIONS

The nostalgic creatives over at The Minus World have put together a new “what if?” scenario: namely, what if the packaging for today’s games fell into the hands of an Atari 2600-era



artist? The reinterpretations bring a clean, almost romanticized aesthetic to the games, and nicely underline two simple facts: most of the game packaging in 2008 is ugly as sin, and bygones should never, ever be bygones.

<http://the-minusworld.com/2008/09/16/atari-modern-classics/>

OCARINA



If you have an iPhone and have spent some time browsing the App Store recently, you’ve likely seen Ocarina, the latest app from developer Smule. And it’s pretty brilliant: the application is sensitive to your breath, touch, and movements, allowing you to play your iPhone like a musical instrument. And it’s social: tap on the globe icon, and you’ll see (and hear) other Ocarina players throughout the world, with the globe highlighting the source of the music. Oh, and we’d be remiss if we didn’t mention the game’s Zeldarian mode, which allows you to channel your inner gamer.



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Game On(line)

A look at some of the Web's not-so hidden gems

words Greg Orlando

Arguably, the best things in life are not free. Just don't tell that to Desktop Tower Defense, Forumwarz, Pandemic II, and an ever-expanding lineup of quality video games available on the Internet.

Free online games are nothing new. For years, Web sites have served up classic arcade titles (Frogger, Pac-Man), electronic versions of board games (Monopoly, Scrabble), and Flash animation-based offerings where, say, a comical cartoon Yeti would use a bat to do horrible things to penguins. Puzzle games such as Cake Mania, Tetris, and Bejeweled gained massive followings.

It is now possible to point to a new crop of Web-based games. These titles, while not quite ready to compete with their PC- or console-based siblings, exhibit a great deal of creativity, ingenuity, and replay value. With these games, it's possible to see a future in which free online games may well become every bit as complex as offerings from the major video game publishers.

Dare to dream...

Forumwarz

Cost: Free

Genre: Turn-based RPG

Developer/Publisher: Crotch Zombie Productions

Web site: www.forumwarz.com

This goofy, sometimes gross, and always funny game puts you in the role of one of the Internet's finest assholes. You can choose to be a troll, camwhore, hacker, emo kid, or permanoob, and it's your goal to destroy Internet forums by any and all means.

Players take their character on a faux-version of the Internet complete with bookmarks and an instant messaging program. The goal is to log on to a message board and "pwn" its various threads. This is accomplished with turn-based attacks; destroy enough threads and the site is wrecked.

Forumwarz allows for multiplayer interaction; some neat quests (including the hunt for pictures of a woman who's slathered herself in ...something decidedly offbeat); and the improvement of a character's statistics.

Pandemic II

Cost: Free

Genre: Strategy

Developer/Publisher: Dark Realm Studios / CrazyMonkeyGames.com

Web site: Crazymonkeygames.com

Pandemic II offers a chilling scenario in which a bacterium, parasite, or virus threatens the Earth's population.

Players take the role of a god of sorts, choosing the means of mankind's destruction. Each of the invaders has its own strengths and weaknesses, and players can spend DNA points to improve their disease's resistance to cold, heat, etc.; the means by which it spreads; the symptoms it causes; and its traits. The game takes place on a world map, with planes and boats zipping around, casually transporting people from country to country.

The goal is to spread the disease without the authorities becoming aware of it. If alerted, hospitals will begin to invent a cure. The game ends when the disease is contained, eradicated or the world's population is reduced to zero.

Desktop Tower Defense

Cost: Free

Genre: Real-time strategy

Developer/Publisher: Paul Preece / Kongregate

Web site:

<http://www.handdrawngames.com>

A wonderful strategy game, Desktop Tower Defense requires you build a staunch defense to quell an invasion of blobs and other monsters.

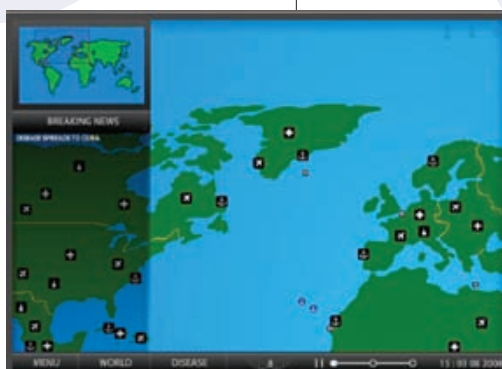
Desktop Tower Defense is remarkably simple to play. A player is given cash with which to place various tower types. Gameplay takes place inside a square with four entranceways; the enemy filters in through two of these entrances and attempts to exit through two others. The towers shoot projectiles at the monsters, and the idea here is to herd the monsters through a maze of towers, thus creating "kill zones" where they can easily be dispatched (and prevented from leaving the gameplay area).

Each of the tower types performs a different function, and all are upgradeable. Players earn cash for each monster destroyed and the game becomes increasingly more difficult as things progress.

"Players take the role of a god of sorts, choosing the means of mankind's destruction."



Forumwarz



Pandemic II



Desktop Tower Defense

Wanna Take a Swing?

Calling all Gladiators!

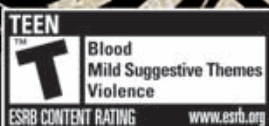
Grab your Wii Remote™ and swing into the action! Journey through the legendary world of Rygar using your mighty weapon, the Diskarmor, to destroy enemies, defend against them, and traverse the island! Show your strength in the new Gladiator Mode by rapidly swinging & slashing your way through nonstop waves of foes!

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Romeo_check_fail

words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

"However boneheaded the subject matter, no other medium is as intimate, is as cruel, is as affectionate, is potentially—potentially!—as rewarding as the videogame."

Take a look through your record collection. What is the dominant theme, from song to song, album to album? Is it collecting trinkets? Racking up a body count? Unlocking content? Or is it love? Through all human expression—music, painting, theater—this one theme overwhelms all other discussion. Even when it is not the focal point, romance tends to lurk in the background, grounding events or providing contrast or subtext. Love is indeed one of the most basic instincts, second only to fear. There are biological and sociological imperatives at work; after individual survival, the next step is ensuring the survival of the group. That's not the human experience, though. The human experience is hormones and longing and a sudden interest in someone else's welfare even above one's own. It is the sense that there is more to life than simply getting by.

So what's wrong with videogames? For all their potential to emulate the workings of a human mind, to teach how the world feels and functions from within an individual perspective, why, after three decades, are they still all about playing in a sandbox with a pile of action figures?

Granted, the pressure is there. Developers want videogames to grow up; critics want them to grow up. As their audience ages, the demand increases for truly adult discussion. Yet it's hard; no one can agree quite what that means. Is it a thematic thing? Is it something about the grammar we use? Is it more a cultural

problem?

Well, yes. All of that. The most pressing problem is, I think, of practicality: videogames as they are commonly built, consumed, and perceived, are largely artifice. Rarely is the form used, as is film or prose or music, to explore a subjective experience. Rather, most videogames serve to dwell on details that people liked in previous games. The "best" videogames—the likes of Treasure's catalog and Pac-Man Championship Edition—are the ones that do the best job at breaking down and rearranging the tropes and grammar that we have come to accept as definition for the form.

Imagine if all media worked like this. "Isn't painting awesome? You got paint, you got canvas... Hey, remember this Klimt? Wasn't it tight? Now look, what if you turn it upside down and add some pink over here; whoa, dude. It's, like, totally better than the original. Now just wait until you see the sequel." Not that there's anything wrong with Quentin Tarantino, in moderation.

Granted, romance is rarely a destination. It's a process that we all go through, that ideally expands our worldview enough to hold more interesting conversation. What is alarming is that videogames have, by and large, not even developed as serious interest in girls. (I'll just go with the gender bias; ring me when there are as many women designing videogames as there are men.) The field is so barren that those few experimental looks at human relationships are usually

hailed as some of the most profound works of literature ever to come out of the medium. Look at the response to *Passage*, or *Braid*—a game I can safely tease because I've been championing it for years. However modest and awkward it might be, however tentative its experiments, the Internet has hailed *Braid* as a transformational work of genius.

Which... it kind of is. And that's the problem; we should be past this by now. For videogames to remain relevant as an expressive medium, they need to be able to express more complex ideas. To do that, they need a more sophisticated grammar. For creators to effectively express themselves, we need a better handle on how to use that grammar. And for all this infrastructure to be of use, we need more thought and ambition in what we strive to say and do with the tools that are available to us.

To arrive at adulthood, we need to pass through adolescence, which means a readjustment both of perspective and of biology. That is, to stop giggling at boobs, and to begin seriously contemplating the wants and needs of others. This is one of the most profound changes a person goes through. This also is analogous to our creative and technical problems.

There are a couple of ways of coming at the problem. One is to repurpose existing, familiar tools. Both *Silent Hill 2* and *Braid* are made up of spit and wire, yet each transcends its parts. Another is to imagine brand new tools—new mechanics, interfaces, theories, and tropes—tailored to exactly what we want to say. That said, history tells us that invention tends to come more by accident than intention, so we probably have better things to worry about than trying to be clever; we just need to keep our minds open and be willing to improvise.

While we're uncurling our imagination, there are three principles to keep in mind. One, game design is pure psychology. It is the same as following a car from the front, pulling an enormous con, or brainwashing. The point is to lure the player into a desired state of mind by crafting a ready and manipulative response for everything he or she might try to do. The player's part is to act, and every reaction that fails to convey meaning and thereby

guide further action is a wasted opportunity. Shape the experience well, and the player's sense of self will expand to fit the mold you have created.

Two, there is no need to be literal. In fact, the less you are, the less you limit yourself. All communication is by nature abstract. Once we have digested a language, it affects us directly in our subconscious, forming a vague muddle of hyperlinked symbols and notions. This is the part of our mind that sorts out meaning, and it does so by drawing comparisons between objects that may have no literal rational connection.

Metaphor is the fundamental way we process and store information, which, as artists and politicians have known for centuries, makes it a potent tool for communication. By embracing the metaphorical value of design language, and bypassing the rational mind, you are increasing the potential bandwidth and nuance of any information you may transmit—which is precisely what we need to do here.

Three, and absolutely the most important, videogames are a study of cause and effect. This ties in to the first point, yet is important enough to establish separately. Every medium serves to study some abstract element of our world. Sculpture communicates through three-dimensional form, film by sequential imagery (frame to frame, shot to shot, scene to scene), videogames through call and response.

More fundamentally and explicitly than other media, videogames are about communication. In no other medium is the flow of communication so overtly two-way. In no other medium except theater—and then only slightly—is by nature the audience actively engaged. This therefore means that between every game and player, a mutual relationship is formed. The player pushes, the game pushes back. Ping, pong. Learning is achieved, and applied. No other medium is as intimate as the videogame. No other medium presents the same potential to get inside another person's head and understand how else a person might see the world.

And this is exactly why romance is such an important threshold. On a basic level, videogames are a romantic relationship. However boneheaded the subject matter, no other medium is as intimate, as cruel, as affectionate, as potentially—potentially!—rewarding as the videogame. But to live up to that potential, we've got to make that leap. We've got to grow the hell up. And we're right on the cusp of it. All we need to do is grit our teeth and make that resolution to climb out of the sandbox and move on.

In our next column, we'll start to look at how we got this far, and brainstorm a little as to where we go from here.



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What compells us?

We all play games for different reasons,
and we know what we like...

■ Dave Halverson

■ Brady Fiechter

■ Casey Loe

■ Eric L. Patterson

■ Heather Anne Campbell

■ Mike Griffin



Dave Halverson

Publisher

It all starts with great character design...

Until recently one thing was always clear: the best-looking games also happened to be the best-playing games. It stands to reason that if a team has the budget and skill to make a great-looking game that they also have the wherewithal to make it play great. Gaming is first and foremost a visual medium after all—otherwise we may as well just ditch these expensive consoles and go back to reading books. Gameplay is of course paramount to any great gaming experience, but if a game is ugly why bother? I can't walk an inch with an unsightly, poorly-designed protagonist. But at some point there was a shift, which after 20 years of gaming life threw me for a loop, where ghastly art, animation and character design is not only acceptable, it's celebrated. The first time I put *Fallout 3* in third-person, my preferred perspective (sorry, I need a character, I'm silly that way) I gasped in disbelief. The game had already sold in excess of a million copies and here I'm moving around a chess-piece of a character

that looks like it was put on ice five years ago. I forced myself to play until I came across the first signs of life, jumping my floating torso/third-person widget over jagged terrain trying to chart a course through the faux collision to get at some reject from Van Damme's last Cyborg movie and that was all I could take. A few years ago such wooden animation would have been considered a major flaw, but now nobody seems to care. *Fallout 3* is racking up legendary scores with no deductions for among the worst third-person character design and animation in all of next-gen. I don't mean to beat up *Fallout 3*—everyone here loves it—I'm just not able to turn a blind eye to character design. The same people that love *Fallout 3* probably love floating torso wartime FPS's too; we just play games for different reasons. My idea of a great action/RPG would be *Valkyria Chronicles*, a living piece of exquisite art, or *Mass Effect*, an epic story with equally epic character and world design.

The first thing I look for in a game is a fluid, meticulously imagined and designed, well-animated leading character. If I'm going to spend my hard-earned money and precious time in a video game world, I need a character that's representative of the best technology has to offer. Dynamic animation and collision (feet and animation in cadence with stairs, slopes, and uneven terrain), animation for changing direction, sufficient frames of animation for jumping (if it applies) and hopefully killer garb should be the rule, not the exception, and if it's homo-sapiens I like a measure of exaggeration so I don't feel like I'm controlling my next-door neighbor. Of course, everything is relevant to the genre or theme. I don't expect *Sockboy* to animate like the *Prince of Persia*, I just like a quality character for whatever journey I'm embarking. Chances are if you fall in love with your protagonist, you're going to have a good time. My first love is for hand-drawn characters. I still think three-dimensional models have a way to go before they can best the likes of the characters in *Odin's Sphere* and that a dedicated seventh generation hand-drawn side scroller would change the course of the foreseeable video-game future (in the hands of the right developer of course).

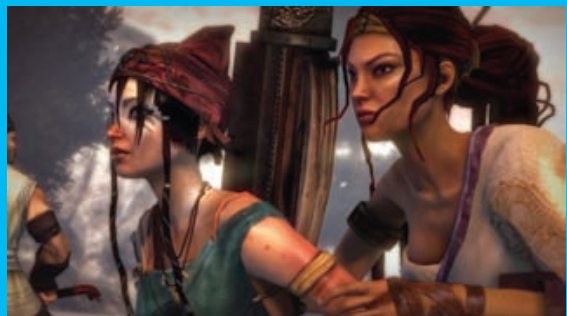
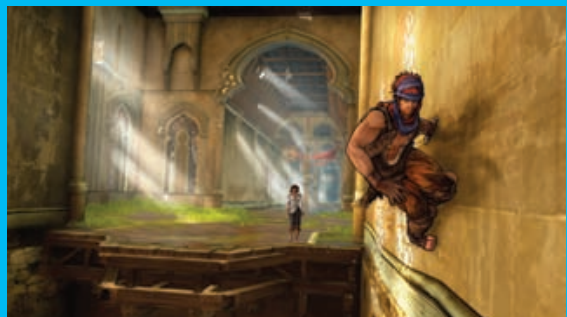
In terms of gameplay, I take things on a per-case basis. I don't generally like floating torso FPSs but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate a game like *BioShock*. As a rule I prefer a game do

"Having a developer tell me what to do next is like all those laugh tracks on TV trying to tell me when to laugh.."

fewer things very well than try to cram in too much and never fully realize any single component. There are rare exceptions, but the best games tend to build on a base set of mechanics. I'll tell you what kills a game, is prodding. Having a developer tell me what to do next is like all those laugh tracks on TV trying to tell me when to laugh. I want to explore and complete tasks in my own way—isn't that what an adventure is all about? Don't give me the answers *with* the test. I have a working brain. Catering to the least common denominator is dangerous business. Lose your core and when Joe average either moves on or moves up you're screwed.

Game length is important too. People whining about the length of a game like *Heavenly Sword* makes me crazy: A casual player maybe, but a critic should know better. When you're moving from point to point and never retracing your steps, a six-to-seven hour long original game containing *Heavenly's* level of artistry, animation and real-time theater is like an eternity. A game like *HS* isn't made to rush through and jump on a forum and say "6hrs dude!" It's meant to be savored, not just played, but admired and mastered. They get better with age. As Dr. Eldon Tyrell said, "The flame that burns twice as bright burns half as long." It took legions of people at *Ninja Theory* and *Weta* to pull that game off and it fell on mainly deaf ears. Why? The media's least-common-denominator follow-the-money mission statement. If *Fallout 3* is supposed to be huge, well, I guess we better say it's flawless. It's a pile-on, me-too aggregate. And that may be OK for some—most even—but it's not for me.

Back on subject, a game's length is important. I expect an adventure to go 12-15 hours; a good action game should last 7-10; and an RPG, Action-RPG, or Open-World game should come in at 25-40; and I don't mind a little challenge. Go ahead, try me, I'm good at this—otherwise I wouldn't have bought your game. I'd much rather play a ferociously beautiful or stylized smaller game with some well-balanced difficulty than a big tedious mission cycling machine. I don't mind powering the generators, but if I have to find the guy who knows the guy that made them; whack him, steal the plans, then jump through more idiotic hoops to get him to give me the access code to power them, well, I've got better things to do. That's not "length"—that's repetition. Give me great art, sticky fun-to-control gameplay and a great score or give me a book, or a little *Chinese Democracy*. A game should look, play and sound great in the eyes of its target audience. It's pretty simple when you get right down to it.



*Not a shameless plug. Please don't send letters.



Brady Fiechter

Editor In Chief

It's in the world

There was a moment in *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, where Lara's flashlight cast crackling shadows on the cavern wall, while she paddled gently in crystal clear water. A female voice sang a lovely melody inside an orchestrated wave of sound, and the scene was complete. I sat back and admired the setting, the mood, the fact that a little part of me was with Lara in that dark tomb. A little piece of me was moved in that moment.

I hold on to scenes in games, moments like when Samus first entered a glass tube holding back a future area to explore, or when Alucard looked through a telescope and watched a cloaked figure paddling slowly in a boat. Even the tiniest little moments count, like when Chrono's mother opened the blinds and let in the morning light, or more pounding moments, like when the dogs crashed through the window in *Resident Evil*, before the solemn typewriter room offered its safety.

My favorite games—*ICO*, *Castlevania*, *Super Metroid*, *Zelda*—create a sense of place and wonder, building little details that my imagination runs wild through. Give me the gloom and quiet of *BioShock* any day over the bombast and spectacle of *Halo*. And if I can have my way, give me fantasy branded by visions I would never see in my waking life.

One of the best games of this generation is *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. If I could receive a gaming wish, it would be to never see another military themed, show-me-your-cool-guns, let's-rock-and-f***ing-roll premise. Ever. I enjoy war games, because they are well crafted and have great teams attached to them. It sucks that they're still made, but foolish me, I'll continue to play them.

And still, *Call of Duty 4* rocked my gaming world. It's a built-in give and take, wishing a game to be something it isn't, and simply giving into everything that it is. But I can't help but imagine what games could be and not be open to the problems of what they are now. There is such a bankruptcy of forward thinking in gamemaking, and it has very little to do with the mechanics that drive them and everything to do with the themes that power their worlds. The growth of games is not traditional under-the-hood gameplay engines, it's the strengths of the gaming narrative experience, the establishment of a time, a place, a setting, a little world that has life.

Traditional storytelling in games is quite crap, really, and there don't seem to be many examples of how we're going to make things better. Serious efforts go in to layering dialogue and story into our gaming worlds, but I often wonder if the whole of the gaming experience is diminished by all the stops and starts I face as the next cut scene plods on. I absolutely love *Metal Gear Solid 4*, but I don't even know if I could tell you more than a sentence of what the hell was going on in that game. Some people

love it, I know, but that doesn't make it good or proper or necessary.

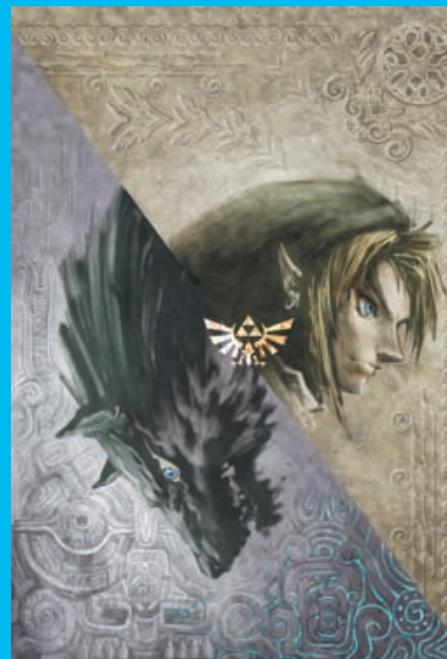
Game writing has a long ways to go, but in the mean time, I try not too get too down on the process. Accept it and move on, play the game and enjoy it for all the many other ways games compel us. If the storytelling works—*Braid* and *Portal* are great examples—then the experience is only that much richer.

Talking about story in games is tough, because we really don't have a language established in the gamemaking process itself. What is it, exactly, that confidently reveals what makes a game "good" or "bad?" The length of a game is largely irrelevant, as long as what is there was brought to its rightful conclusion, and everything leading up to that end is lean and mean. The experience is not defined by the number of weapons or vehicles or levels or bosses or enemy types. Getting tied down to quantifying everything to reach a definition of quality is misguided and arbitrary. A feature set means nothing, a move set means nothing, a beautiful game world means nothing if there is no purpose, no simple fun.

"If the storytelling works—*Braid* and *Portal* are great examples—then the experience is only that much richer."

If a game feels good, and feels good throughout the entire journey, that's about as simple as it gets in me describing what I want out of a game. Feeling good can be nothing more than that nebulous gaming emotion of engagement, the satisfaction of anything my character does. Or it can be an overwhelming atmosphere, the house in *Resident Evil*, the city in *Assassin's Creed*, the castle in *Castlevania*—as long as that space serves a gameplay purpose, of course. Whatever drives the larger emotion.

Feeling something from a game is what I want; it feels good when art provides an emotional response, and that's exactly what I got in that pool of water in *Tomb Raider: Underworld*. A game can retrace familiar steps, stumble technically, pack in a lot less fodder than the big blockbuster of the moment, and inevitably turn out to be the "best" game in all the ways that matter.





Casey Loe

Associate Editor

Fun is overrated

There's a reason game aficionados are still arguing about Dreamcast-classic Shenmue eight years after its release. Shenmue perfectly illustrates the divide between critics who idealize the simple fun of intuitive and responsive gameplay, and those—like me—who are instead looking for a powerful and memorable experience. I'll be the first to admit that Shenmue *isn't* fun. At all. It invented the much-maligned QTE, widely considered to be one of the worst game mechanics of all time. Its mandatory forklift-racing mini-game is infamous for being one of the most boring and annoying mini-games ever. And even its rock-solid fighting engine was robbed of any satisfaction by the way the game immediately switched to an easier mode whenever a player died and continued. But Shenmue put you in the shoes of another human being, living another life in another world, more skillfully than any game had ever done before. Since I lack the power to reincarnate myself as a young man coming of age in mid-80's Japan, Shenmue is as close as I'll ever get to living that life—and it was a fascinating experience that I won't soon forget. Assassin's Creed spawned a similar controversy; its tedious, mandatory sub-missions were decried by nearly everyone who reviewed the game. But Assassin's Creed brought its Crusades-era Middle East setting alive in a powerful way that would never have been possible in previous generations of game technology. Those who reveled in the experience of wandering the alleys of the

historical city of Acre gave Assassin's Creed 10's, while those who bristled at the lack of consistent fun dished out 4's and 5's.

If Assassin's Creed has a polar opposite, it would be something like Boom Blox on the Wii. The game is undeniably fun, but the experience of throwing blocks around some pastel-colored farm is not one that grabs peoples' imaginations as much as, say, traversing the lush forests of a fantasy world or living the life of an Eastern European gangster in New York. Games like Boom Blox and Wii Sports *are* fun, but their single-minded focus on entertaining gameplay perfectly illustrates the shallowness of "fun" when divorced from a memorable story or setting. Like digital Pringles, you don't want to stop playing them once you start, but the game leaves you with no memories to savor, and no new experiences to ponder. The seagulls circling in the opening scene of Grandia, the Silent Hill changeover in the elementary school, and the ghost train in Final Fantasy VI remain fresh in my mind to this day, but I'd be hard pressed to pull a specific memory from the hundreds of hours I've spent playing more "fun" games

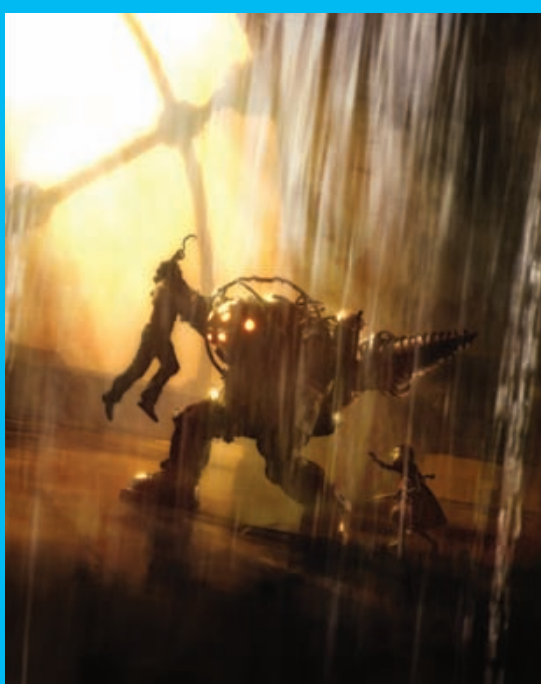
like Tetris or Power Stone or Wii Sports.

Obviously, fun gameplay and memorable experiences aren't mutually exclusive—plenty of games, like Super Mario Galaxy or the recent Fable II, offer both. My point is that we hear a lot of critics and game designers preaching about the importance of fun, while games that boast primarily of spectacular graphical environments or an involved narrative are dismissed as somehow shallow or crass. If you don't believe me, consider how much more power "graphics whore" has as an insult than, say, "gameplay whore."

"Consider how much more power 'graphics whore' has as an insult than, say, 'gameplay whore.'"

But as game technology gets more impressive, and game writing grows more mature, games are beginning to demonstrate a stunning power to immerse players in fantasy worlds, or in historical settings, or in characters living infinitely more interesting lives. When Bioshock put players into the shoes of a pivotal character in an alternate-history 1960's underwater city built around controversial economic philosophies, it let you *experience* a fascinating world that any other medium could only *tell* you about. It deserves every bit of praise it got for that, even though—let's face it—it wasn't anything special in the shooter department. We like to think that it's somehow more enlightened to play games for the gameplay than the mostly visual aspects of their atmosphere, and we like to mock video game storylines as being trite or insubstantial. But think back to your most powerful gaming memories: Are they of game environments that wowed you, or a storyline point that shocked you? Or are they some tactical "fun" experience, like a really good lap in Mario Kart, or a perfect riff in Guitar Hero?

Unless you chose the latter (and we both know you didn't), let's stop treating games as if they're supposed to be the digital equivalent of a ball tied to a paddle, and admit that their greater potential lies in the ability to let us explore worlds we could never otherwise see, and situations we could never otherwise experience.





Eric L. Patterson

Associate Editor

What I like

I've been a fan of video games for as long as I can remember. I can still name off a dozen games I put quarters into at the bowling alley or supermarket near my childhood home. I vividly remember the day my mother and I brought home my Atari 2600 (complete with *Berzerk* and *Defender*), and I've now been playing titles across various systems and platforms for so long that I honestly cannot recall a time when video games did not exist as a part of my life.

One memory in particular stands out, however. It was a cold winter day, and I was standing in the lobby of the train depot of my hometown. I was twelve at the time, so not a little kid by any means, but I remember feeling so small in that big golden room with its looming domed

ceiling. We had come to send off my brother's girlfriend, and then we headed back out into the darkness of the night, a soft glow all around as the streetlights reflected off of both the snow falling from the sky, and what had already blanketed the ground in white.

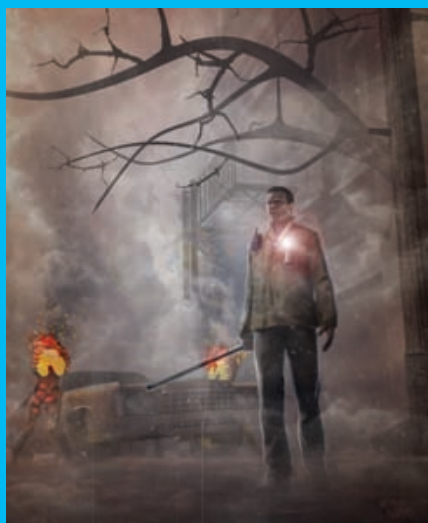
Why I remember all of this is because that little excursion from the warm comfort of my home had come with a high price: my having to temporarily stop playing *Phantasy Star*. I remember a great many games before then, but there was something about this new release from Sega that was different. It may be hard to believe, but there was a time when console gamers knew nothing of the RPG genre, and *Phantasy Star* brought with it a scope and sweep that I became absolutely enthralled with. Plenty of games had characters, plenty had stories, but none had combined them in such a way as to create an adventure that felt larger than life. Not only did I want Alis to win against that no-good King Lassic, but I wanted to be the one that would help her do so.

Looking back, it was *Phantasy Star* that really shaped who I would truly become as a gamer. I could sit here and tell you what I like about and enjoy in games: great multiplayer, interesting challenges, loads of changeable options or customizable characters. But the truth is, those aren't who I am, those aren't really the things I most long for in the games I play. The truth lies in that kid all of those years ago, sitting in front of a television, Master System controller in hand, exploring the vast worlds of Algol, Motavia, and Dezoris. *Phantasy Star* wasn't a new game I plugged in and played, it was a new

experience I lived and cherished.

Those same feelings and emotions are why I ended up loving *World of Warcraft* as much as I do. For many, the game's appeal is the immense social aspect that awaits, and I'll be honest, that is something that I indeed enjoy. That young me playing *Phantasy Star* could never have imagined that, one day, I could be setting off on a similar escapade, except this time I'd be doing it with thousands of other gamers just like me, with whom I could either join together in the struggles that faced us, or battle against as opposing sides. More than all of that, however, was the utter awe I felt when I first stepped

"Video games for me can be so many things, and there are so many that I cherish..."



foot into the world of Azeroth. *WoW* isn't a game, it's a living, breathing universe that exists somewhere just out of reach, and my computer is a door into that world. So many of my experiences stand out: walking into Stormwind for the first time, the vastness of the city looming all around me; my first steps into neutral territory, and the honest uneasiness I felt as I had no idea what awaited me there; that day that I finally was able to purchase my first mount; and the freedom I felt as we rode off together to explore lands I had never before visited.

Video games for me can be so many things, and there are so many that I cherish, be it their old-school sense of pure challenge (*Galaga*, *Pac-Man CE*, *Puyo Puyo*), their spirit of competitive multiplayer (*Halo 3*, *Herzog Zwei*, *Top Shop*) or perhaps their encouraging of teamwork and reliance on others (*Gauntlet*, *Phantast Star Online*, *Rainbow Six Vegas*), to their desire to simply bring me something new and unique (*Katamari Damacy*, *Pop'n Music*, *Rhythm Tengoku*). As well, there are so many things that I could list as being right and wrong about gaming, the good of giving players a wide variety of options and choices, the bad of stupid design decisions, terrible user interfaces, or ridiculous gameplay concepts that are more frustration than fun.

When I stop to think about those games that have made the most impact on my life, however, it comes down to a simple factor: games that have presented me worlds and characters that are exciting and enthralling, and then encouraged me to experience them to their fullest. From wandering the streets of *Silent Hill*, to racing across the rooftops of *Jet Set Radio Future*'s Tokyo, to all the people and places I came to hold dear in *Persona 3*, these are just a few of the games that stopped being lines of code and polygons and became worlds that I would end up treasuring.



Heather Anne Campbell

Executive Editor



Mechanical and emotional synergy

Games are one of two things. Games are either immersive other-worlds or they are mechanics. They are either *stories* or they are *systems of play*.

Extremely infrequently, they are both. These games are the industry's shining accomplishments, its rarest achievements. *Portal*. *Out of this World*. *Cave Story*, quite nearly. *Gears of War*. *Shadow of the Colossus*.

Rogert Ebert writes that movies, "...are an empathy machine drawing us into other lives, allowing us to identify with those of other races, genders, occupations, religions, income levels, or times in history. Good films enlarge us, and are a civilizing medium. Bad films narrow us. No films at all impoverishes us."

Games are the same, and can do the same things. The only difference is that we control the empathy machine. We activate the delivery, engage the mechanism of identification. If film draws us in—brings us closer to the protagonist—then gaming promises something more: the opportunity to *become* the protagonist.

Or, at least, it is the potential of this idea that makes games compelling for me. When systems and stories are married, we are nearest to this potential. This is when

games are at their greatest.

Great games happen when the *mechanics* are the *system* of narrative transmission.

What's more, a total synergy between these elements, between mechanics and environment, will guarantee that a game is fun. That it drags you toward it with certain gravity. Even if the subject matter of the game is dark, or its protagonist disaffected, the content and systems themselves will compel you to play.

Now, that's not to say that a game can't be fun when it lacks an environment. *Tetris* is a stripped-down engine of play with an inevitable conclusion. That is, when the algebra of the game overwhelms the player, the game ends. Yet, even without a story, *Tetris* is fun.

Street Fighter III is a personal favorite of mine, and another example of free mechanics: the systems of the game are the game. *Street Fighter III* benefits from colorful characters, but doesn't need them; if two players habitually choose Ken as their avatar, they can still play for hours, despite the lack of diversity. The improvisation on the engine's melodies rewards the player with infinite hours of fun.

But now, imagine a game that has *Street Fighter III*'s engine . . . and a rich, lusty world to explore. That, to me, would be a perfect game. It's the game that I describe, briefly, in my bio in every issue of *Play Magazine*. If that idea is too narrow for you, then imagine a game that has the mechanical depth of a Capcom fighter, but without the fighting. Imagine that it doesn't pander to our common expectations. Imagine a game without barrels and tutorials, without squeaking citizens with pop-up bubble speeches about, "hitting A to pound the ground!!!"

Imagine a game where you're dropped off without tutorials (*Out of this World*) in an environment thickened by an imaginative history (*Shadow of the Colossus*), with crunchy, arrogant movement (*Gears of War*), and a wicked script (*Portal*). Wouldn't that be compelling?

To satisfy my personal aesthetics, let's have everyone dress really stylishly, and limit the palate of the game to grey, green, sharp blue, and fascist red. I'd like the soundtrack to be melancholic . . . until the main character dies, at which point the

"Great games happen when the mechanics are the system of narrative transmission."

soundtrack bursts forth with bright melody, and the screen floods with color. That's the game I would design for myself.

It would also involve a **great deal of jumping or flying**.

I believe that great designers are always designing games for themselves. Cliff Bleszinski and his team at Epic are making games that they'd want to play, that they imagined when they were younger. Miyamoto's greatest games are born out of his personal daily world, or a nostalgia for his childhood. I think Team ICO is hard at work making a game that satisfies them, not an imagined straw-man audience.

I think games fail when they are a checklist of what an audience expects from a game. When a room of designers has to satisfy a spreadsheet of "Game Things" before they can publish. Additionally, I think games suffer when there is a huge PR team systematically leaking content exclusives and screenshots with bullet-pointed press releases. These are not elements of a great game; they are the clutter that crushes one. *Cave Story* is a great game, made by a single human being. Pixel was inspired by games he had enjoyed, and crafted a world that he'd want to engage, with mechanics that satisfied him. *Cave Story* is compelling, and until years after its release, had no PR whatsoever.

What forces me to game is the promise of more games like *Cave Story*, like *Out of this World*, like *Portal* and *Shadow of the Colossus*. I look forward to a future of greater maturity, subtlety, and restraint. Games of romance or religion. Games inside of thoughts, games about the unsaid things between co-workers, games which are set everywhere in the world . . . in the time it takes for a coin to fall from a pocket. I look forward to a future of games unbridled by industry expectations, with the variety of subjects that we expect from novels.

Games are compelling because they can be fun, and games are at their zenith when the mechanics and environment are loving partners. I love games because I love to be engaged, and to engage. I am passionate about deploying my imagination and attention to other places, and games, more than film, can provide this . . . because they let me involve myself in their narratives. Games are interactive theatre, they are world-wide online improvisation. And as more designers and producers realize the potential of games for delivering stories with unique mechanics, the less any other kind of media will matter. Games can be everything. And that's what makes them compelling.





Mike Griffin

PC Editor

Burn the foundation, and the rest comes tumbling down

When I tell people my job involves reviewing entertainment products, mostly video games, there's always a procession of grins and, "Man, playing games must be the best job in the world!"-type comments. My well-worn response is usually, "It's only as good as the game you're playing." In this business we don't have the luxury of playing only the good ones. We spend extensive hours trudging through disasters, often far beyond the likely turn off point for most gamers. But that contrast is absolutely necessary, as the lamentations I suffer when playing a dud will add meaning to my jubilation when I play something terrific. It's that embryonic connection to a great game that compensates for all the crimes of its brethren.

Obviously there's a history of influential classics before the arrival of Treasure, but no other developer had such a profound effect on me (and my expectations). A huge part of my ability to enjoy a game relates directly to control, and none of Treasure's infamous game-defining hooks (like the dualistic nature of gems like Silhouette Mirage and Ikaruga) would work if they hadn't long ago mastered the art of making a character fun to manoeuvre and attack with. It's a deep understanding of this notion: if a game doesn't master the execution of its most basic elements, it's probably not going to work on any other level.

Rarely is it a wholesale evolution with Treasure, however, just like most of the best developers. Rather, traditional control mechanics and expected behaviors are tirelessly iterated on and polished to perfection. When a developer can leap those crucial hurdles, every other investment—the hooks, presentation, world design—becomes a complimentary force. Empower a player with precise and satisfying tools to explore and conquer the game world, and the playground is instantly a better place. I should highlight Valve in this area too, experts of foundation. Through extreme iteration and play testing, Valve utterly conquers core mechanics, removing all unnecessary barriers between the player and superb level design, pacing and personality.

I've always been a huge multiplayer gamer and I'll typically spend a great deal of time playing a game's multiplayer modes during review. With broadband and network gaming, the industry has created an atmosphere where the consumer is now giving equal or greater consideration to a game's multiplayer component, so everybody's taking a stab at co-op. This makes it easier to weed out the missed attempts from the champions like Gears 2, Resistance 2 and Left 4 Dead.

Recently a Play Online forum member expressed his resentment of online co-op, protesting its recent ubiquity as overkill. It wasn't too long ago that players were begging for more co-op campaigns. The comments that followed brought up several good

"Overall design parameters are going to be different than in a strictly offline campaign."

points. The fact is, there are compromises that allow a co-op campaign to function (scripting can sometimes feel inorganic and contrived), and other advantages that allow it to excel. Overall design parameters are going to be different than in a strictly offline campaign. Imagine trying to make 4-player co-op work in Fallout 3?

A recent addition to the annals of awesome co-op gaming, Left 4 Dead initially caused a flurry of conflicting emotions in me, eventually leading to an epiphany: Left 4 Dead doesn't need or pretend to be anything more than it is. During my first few hours with the game, I was having a blast with some very competent and amiable online teammates, but I found myself asking for more. I wanted more weapons, more types of Infected, a more fleshed-out campaign story. I later came to the realization that Left 4 Dead is already fully formed: balanced and dynamically paced to near perfection, guided by supremely polished—yet utterly familiar—core FPS mechanics that compliment a handful of effective, reliable co-op tactics. It's a very pure design, yet it manages to evoke genuine tension in all players through an intelligent spawning system, a clever feat indeed. Players are never bogged down by bloated ideas and systems that have no place.

I'm always seeking that core purity, that clarity of purpose in game design, regardless of genre or complexities. Respect for the player first and the material second, because the latter will shine brighter when you fulfill the former.





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RIDE



HELL

words Brady Flechter

No Easy Rider Here

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L
 American writer and painter Henry Miller once said of the majestic Big Sur, "It was here that I first learned how to say Amen." If you've ever traveled this winding stretch of California coast, you'd understand what he meant. The sheer cliffs overlooking the ocean, the rolling fog hiding the tips of the mountains, the giant redwood trees reaching toward the heavens—it's a place of quieting beauty.

Travel several hours south and you come upon more modest yet no less moving views, eventually entering the posh beach community of Malibu. Keep on going, past the suffocating city lights of Los Angeles, out into the eastern desert, and it is here you will find the lonely beauty of Joshua Tree, a destination for the wonderer who wants to get away from it all.

Reach well away from the ocean, up into the sprawl of Nevada and Yosemite, and you'll discover a land and way of life that legends are made of. Hippies, bikers, truckers, one small town after another, waiting for the latest story from

"Just the process of simply being in the world. Free, man."

the latest traveler.

In *Ride to Hell*, that traveler is you, Ray, a Vietnam vet who has just returned from the war. At the beginning of the story, everything is unnecessarily complicated from your perspective, the world has seemed to really change when you were gone, but now you're being offered the simpler solution. There's a bike, there's some friends, that's all we need. Just the process of simply being in the world. Free, man.

Ray begins this open-world journey looking for a way to connect and strip away the burden of his past. He finds the seeds to that new growth in a small biker gang called the Devils Hand, who welcome him as one of their own. He's the new guy on the block, and that's where the game essentially begins: you,

your motorcycle, and the opportunity to discover the West Coast while raising your street cred and forming a capable gang of your own.

"When we came up with basic idea, it was *Hell's Angels*. It naturally led to the '60s era, and then we thought, OK, we want to convey freedom and the action you see in a '60s movie," explains executive producer Hannes Seifert.

This is a sand-box game, so naturally you've got the GTA branding to contend with, which these ex-Rockstar guys working out of Vienna, Austria were naturally sensitive to. "We worked on GTAs, if we do an open-world game, people are just gonna say we ripped it off. We thought about doing a more structured level game, *Mother Truckers*, something like that. Maybe a third-



person action game. The levels became bigger and the more we thought about it, shouldn't we have a road map? And then it just made sense that it had to be where we are now, this huge, open world. How else can we convey freedom? Really, there was no compromise, it had to be a world game. I really think in the future you'll have to find a really good reason why you do not do open-world games. It's just a natural thing, you see something over there and you want to go try it out."

Zelda comes up in the conversation as a reference to one of the original "sandbox" games of sorts. Link's adventures are obvious inspirations for

the Ride to Hell team—their demoing room door is labeled Hyrule—but in ways that aren't necessarily on the surface. Zelda is a game so rich in mood and spirit, which are qualities that crackle in Ride to Hell. Seifert speaks of "selling emotion," as he enthusiastically points out how proud they are to have created such a spectacular view on one of the highest peaks in Ride to Hell. Dismounting the bike, climbing up to an observatory tower, you can see the ocean expanse, the distant mountains, the winding roads reaching into a far village. "It was such a big deal to us to create this expanse, creating this distance," says Seifert.

"And driving through the desert, these empty landscapes, more or less alone at times, we wanted to capture this massive world size in a number of areas," says producer Marin Gazzari. "That was always one of the goals. Playing tricks with lighting, tracking the rising and setting sun, emphasizing different angles of lighting, we are really happy how it's turned out, and we're not even close to being finished. I want to play around with saturations and tones, really capture that feel of the movies back then. We have a specific mood, a feeling, a blend between the movies, the clothing, the style. You think of more fog in the mountain areas, heat haze in the

desert regions."

If you get high enough in the mountain regions, clouds will surround you on your ride, perhaps opening up for a rain storm as the dynamic weather system plays out. Most of Ride to Hell takes place in the expanse of the West Coast outdoors. The important emphasis on dramatic lighting comes up in conversation after conversation.

"Our compromise for this game was to try and reach as high a level of detail as possible, but we had to keep as much of the engine as procedural as possible," begins Seifert. "That was a highest priority. So the lighting, the time of day, you can come at night, it's dark, you see the light pouring through the windows in the houses. The level of detail isn't like a first-person shooter, but we have thousands of objects, thousands of houses. Everything is lit in real time. We wanted to have a look of consistency. The hills will have different varieties and colors and shapes, representing the different areas of the world. I think we have around 9 different types of foliage, from the Redwoods to the Sierra Nevadas to the desert."

"It was my major concern, it doesn't matter how nice assets are, if they aren't under that common sky, the correct lighting, then you just don't get the mood," says art director Julian Kenning. "The imagination I had for this was very, very clear and rather easy to communicate. It started to work right from the beginning. The particulars of the sky are very, very important. It's something that you really have to think about, you can walk out on the street and the way the sky is on that day has an influence on your mood. People all over the world sit in front of sunsets, holding hands, kissing, it's a very strong thing. The sky is our roof. It must be dramatic, contain some special characteristic."

The setting in Ride to Hell is a character, and so is your cherished ride. You begin the game with a modest bike, but as you earn and discover parts, you can basically build the hog of your dreams. "The idea was, if you see a certain type of Chopper on the street, then with the 1960s parts, of course, you can create that bike in the game," explains Gazzari. "If you want a bike that's really low, with long forks and a narrow front wheel and a really wide rear wheel with a red and white paint job with chrome exhaust, then you can do it in the game. You can have a handful of bikes, save the blueprints. If there's a look or certain style of bike that interests you, you can really experiment."

Of course with a great bike comes even more respect. Part of the gameplay thrust is growing Ray as respected entity in Devils Hand and creating an aggressive reputation wherever he goes. Respect is the game's currency. You can recruit others to join up, helping your cause. Details are being kept under wraps for now, but there will be a system

built into *Ride to Hell* that tracks your actions as the story unfolds. "And we're really proud of the story we're coming up with," says Gazzari. "It's a story we really think captures all these great biker movies, a Sonny Badger biography, Hunter S Thompson, *Easy Rider*. You'll recognize aspects from the stories. Mood and places from the films. The story is a really important part of the game. But, I want to emphasize that the story is one aspect that pulls you through the game. There's a lot of other things, like getting respect, unlocking territories, buildings, getting more parts for your bike as you find new areas. There are several forces that will appeal to one player more than another."

West coast living is a vibe, a story painted in the melting pot of a culture of dreamers. "We want this game to be an experience. An experience is a sequence of emotions, basically," says Gazzari. "I'm kick starting my bike, I'm riding into the sunset, then I'm making a left turn and all the sudden involved in a little road rage, then I'm off again to the sunset. You've got the story going on with cut scenes or whatever, but that's not really the main story. The main story is what you're creating, the sequence of events you're experiencing as you play."

Ride to Hell is set up as a three-act

structure. The game begins on a more light-hearted note, in a tiny town called Dead End. "The first act is more about the sun, fun, partying, the '60s feelings," explains Seifert. "The second act, Times of War, is where you start to really go against the other gangs. Guns are introduced, then the third act is about revenge, stuff like that. We have quite the story arc. The tone really shifts."

Along for the ride to drive the mood is, of course, the music of the times, with over 300 licensed tracks, including the absolute necessity "Born to be Wild." As the story pushes forward, the music will reflect the plot, and you'll have specific songs that fit the place you might be visiting. "Go into a trucker bar, you'll hear country. Go to the hippie community, you'll hear pop," explains Seifert. "When you go to the biker bars, you'll hear more rock songs. The thing about the radio station is that it's dynamic, it's not prerecorded. Every mission has radio lines, so the news announcers will tell you, Oh, there's gonna be this big rock concert going down—this is the concert

"An experience is a sequence of emotions, basically," Producer Gazzari





"It's about grabbing someone, throwing them over a counter, into a stack of tires." Executive Producer Seifert

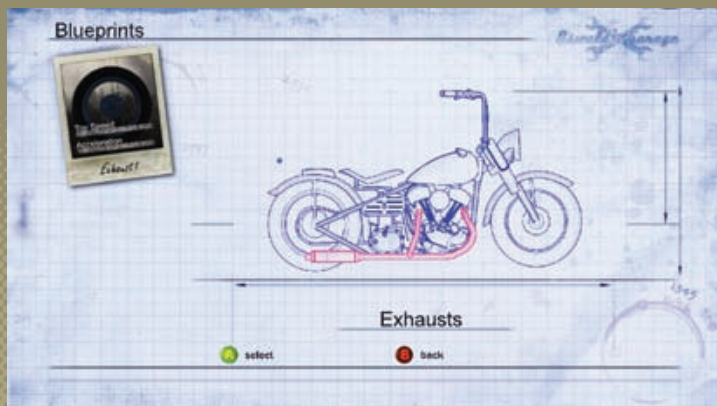




you actually will go to—and once you've been there, there's this incident. There's this murder at the rock concert, biker gangs have been involved, the police are now going to crack down on them, you hear this on the news. You get the feedback of reactions."

As you'd expect in a game of this nature, there are main objectives, and less important ones, like going out to the desert to kill a rattlesnake for a medicine man, or searching for mushrooms—eat the wrong ones and the screen drips with trippy colors—to hand to the cook in a local diner. Most places start out neutral, and it's up to you to build favor and create a friendly environment. Gas stations are important to fill up the tank, diners and bars give you food and health, and you never know when you may benefit from a safe haven if a rival gang is out for your ass. The game gets progressively more intense as the gang wars heat up, introducing a gun later on to compliment what is essentially a melee combat system: punch, kick, grab, combo. They're keeping it simple but dynamic, as you'd expect. "It's not about being violent, shooting someone's head off. It's about grabbing someone, throwing them over a counter, into a stack of tires," says Seifert.

The game is set in 1969, which means it's all about sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and yes, there will be plenty of all three. One mission in the game involves talking with The Doctor, who has a very special medicine that needs delivered to a hippy establishment on the outskirts



of town. In Malibu, you'll come across a porn producer named The Flying Dutchman, who gifts you a Polaroid camera and introduces you to the sex minigame. From here you'll head north, take a picture of your lady friend, do whatever you choose in the moment. At night, you can snap a shooting star for a special achievement. The camera will come in extremely handy when it's time to take down a town sheriff and snap him with a prostitute.

Ride to Hell really is about the ride in many respects, and a lot of central missions will require locomotion for completion. "What we really want to make absolutely as good as possible is the riding around in the world and everything that's connected to that," says Gazzari. "We really want to make the riding around parts compelling... it's really the center of the biker experience. The traffic has to react to you in many ways, the people in the cars don't really like you, they honk, give you looks. Police really keep the bikers in check, drive behind them, get on their news. You see the guys riding around you, behind you, you hear all the different engine sounds, you really feel like you aren't alone in the world, you've got this gang with you, even if it's just a few people at first. You're going somewhere, you're about to raise hell. That's just the experience of it all."

Much of the game structure has been lifted from the movies, books and cultural references of the times, drawing out missions and events. "Of course we're not copying straight out of all this source material, but it's that there are so many interesting and incredible

and bizarre things that we just didn't have to think too much about inventing new stuff," begins Gazzari. "We just borrowed things, mixed them up, added a new structure to them. Look at the Altamont concert. It was basically a free concert that was supposed to be held in San Francisco, but then in '69, the Rolling Stones were to play. So many people were expected to show up that they moved it to this race track, and the Rolling Stones were basically scared of how big the thing was. So they basically had Hell's Angels do security for them. The problem was they paid them with beer, and they paid them in advance. The Hell's Angels parked their bikes right in front of the stage, because they figured no one would get near them. But nobody really cared so the Angels got really nervous, the mood got really bad, at some point somebody pulled a gun and wanted to kill Keith Richards. The Hell's Angeles, just doing their job, stabbed the guy and he died. So this was around when the hippy scene became a bit dark, and the Hell's Angels started to build a bad reputation."

Yeah, a somewhat nasty reputation is inevitable when you're beating the crap out of people, whether on foot or bike. On foot, you've got bats, tire irons, chains, wrenches, plenty of good bludgeoning instruments. On the bike or in car (or any sort of vehicle you want to commandeer), you can confront anyone you want, at any time—consequence or not. Road rage comes into play, where a quick-time sequence grants you a finishing move that will, say, send someone flying off the bike or spinning out of control and flipping into

BIKES



The bikes here are all built from the parts available in-game. Deep Silver increased the resolution for the printed enlargements and rendered them in print quality. But all of them are built with the modular bike customization feature in the game.



an accident zone. "It's really important that we create believable AI with the vehicles," says Gazzari. "We're creating biases in the driver AI. I want the timid Sunday driver: oh no, there's bikers coming, we better look out. They go out of their way to avoid you. Then you have the aggressive trucker, who maybe tries to run you off the road. If you take that just a half step farther, maybe you have this truck driver, who really hates the slow Sunday driver and gets overly aggressive, causing an accident. When you're riding along with your gang, you might see an accident. It just creates a richer experience."

The team has a motto, written on the design wall: freedom, simplicity, choice. There's beauty in simplicity; and simplicity can be a deceptive

word. Gazzari thinks of it as a sort of metaphor for the biking culture and the west coast. "That's something that even as an idea kind of came from the biker culture references," he says. "There's a simple concept of the world when you're a biker, I'm more or less the good guy and if something bad happens, it's not really my fault. Yeah, you know, someone placed a stash in my car, I don't know how it got there. I went to prison because of a misunderstanding. The bikers, we just want to have fun, we got the bikes, we got the girls, we've got the open road, the places we want to get to. And anyone who is against it isn't really on our side, and that's not much of a problem. And part of the '60s culture, things would be even simpler if the man wasn't against it."



Heavy Rain

Be prepared...

words Evan Shamoon



It's half an hour before midnight, and erogenous zones are clearly being given their proper attention: we can hear the French couple in the adjacent room making sweet, French love like it's their last day on earth—so loudly, in fact, that we can barely hear these words as we type them. As their bed shakes so too do our walls, and atop the late-night ambiance of thunder and lightning outside our window, the woman's screams create a rather convincing (and optionally interactive) *mis en scene*. Sony PR stunt or mere coincidence? Most likely the latter. It's raining in Paris. Heavily.

Apropos, then, as we're sprawled out with our long American legs and long American syllables in a hotel room watching spectacularly bad French television, having just returned from developer Quantic Dream's studio to see its upcoming PlayStation 3 opus, *Heavy Rain*. The title is the developer's latest and most promising attempt to fulfill its vision of reinventing interactive storytelling; whether it can achieve such lofty goals remains to be seen. The question of whether they're making a valiant attempt, however, seems unquestionable.

First, let's rewind: It was during E3 of 2006 when the French developer first showed a technical demo of the game, which it called



“The title is the developer’s latest and most promising attempt to fulfill its vision of reinventing interactive storytelling...”

“The Casting.” The five-minute clip showed nothing more than a virtual actress stepping into a nondescript room, and delivering what was arguably the most convincing real-time monologue ever seen in a videogame. There was an element of Uncanny Valley, certainly; the woman’s eyes were less than convincing, and some of her physical movements were off just enough to bring a sense of unreality to the whole affair. But despite such seams, the whole thing was emotional: her recollection of falling in love went from being heartbroken to vindictive, climaxing with tears streaming down her face as she held a gun to her head, and finally, heatedly, turned it on the camera. It was a recreation of a real person demonstrating real emotion, on a real-time, interactive stage. The seemingly simple concept proved deceptively enticing—for many in the press it was the most interesting thing Sony had to show for its then-nascent system, and seemed to promise a whole new world of possibilities.

It also impressed Sony, apparently, who picked up the game as an exclusive first-party title and will publish it on PS3 late next year.

Now we’re in Paris, trying to dig up a bit more insight into what’s going to make Heavy Rain tick. Like the company’s last game, Indigo



The settings pack a remarkable amount of detail.

Prophecy (whose name, incidentally, was chosen by its US publisher Atari; in Europe, the game goes by its original title, *Fahrenheit*), the game feels a bit like the old “point and click” adventures popular in the 1980s and early 90s from such companies as LucasArts and Sierra. In games like *King’s Quest* and *The Secret of Monkey Island*, the player’s role was essentially to solve problems with their brains and creativity, rather than sheer physicality and reflexes. Find some string and combine it with a grasshopper, and you could create a fishing line with which to catch some red snapper, which you could prepare for your love interest to win her affection. Heavy Rain combines this sort of approach with the ethical interactivity of games like *Fable* and *Knights of the Old Republic*, but for the first time brings them into a simulated, present-day reality. This is the stuff neither of Tolkien nor Lucas; at least in terms of tone and subject matter. Think of it as interactive Scorsese. The characters and environments are taken from real life, its fiction ripped from newspaper headlines rather than unhinged fantasy. Director David

Cage points out that this is the first time he has been able to make this leap of faith; even with Indigo Prophecy—essentially a crime thriller set in the present day—he had to make the leap to demons and the undead to appease the game’s lack of graphical photorealism. No such concessions will be made with Heavy Rain—this is a story about human beings, set in the suburbs somewhere on the East Coast. And there will be nary a cacodemon nor an android to be found. The game attempts to usher in a new, long-awaited age for videogames: realism.

“I believe that the videogame industry makes games for people who are 12-years-old,” says Cage in his thick French accent. “I wanted to make a game for adults.” In describing the experience his team is crafting, he uses words like “emotional,” “depth,” “meaning,” and “film noir;” it will be about choices and consequences, not about winning or losing. His starting point was that games are mature enough to tell stories with the complexity of a satisfying film, while still leaving room for interactivity. The structure will be conducive

to those who would rather play in small bursts instead of hours at a time. It's broken down into short scenes rather than levels, and jumps around through time and space between different sets (unlike traditional games, which generally stick you in one area until you finish it). There are no "techniques" to master, nor are there any moves to memorize; in many ways, it's the anti-game game. In fact, calling it a game even seems a bit off-target...interactive storytelling seems much more appropriate.

Of course, achieving this requires something of a developmental re-think. As essentially every facial and body animation in the game is motion-captured, Quantic Dream could not take the standard approach of outsourcing their motion capture to an external studio, as is the norm. Instead, they built their own studio in house, fully equipped with 28 mocap cameras, a full sound studio, and their own set of proprietary technology and tools. Essentially, they needed to change the production pipeline into something that works like a virtual movie set. Insofar as we can tell, they have succeeded: the early fly-throughs of the game's environments are utterly breathtaking in their attention to detail. Rainy crime scenes and various dimly-lit interiors look like they were shot in 35 mm film, with a very talented set designer and cinematographer at the helm.

But believe it or not, the scale is exponentially bigger: where a long film shoot will last about six weeks, Cage spent nine months fully immersed in directing actors and motion capturing them in the studio. And while a traditional film script is about 120 pages, *Heavy Rain* weighs in at over 2,000. The five-act story arc will involve a complicated series of interwoven narrative threads, all tied together with what Cage calls a fractal structure. It has been promised before, and even successfully implemented at times—your actions will very much shape the narrative arc of the game. Events will transpire differently depending on you, and characters will die if you let them. The goal is simple: to make the player both the director and the actor at once.

And then there's the physicality of the world. Everything in the game is its own proper 3D object, from each key on a typewriter to a small digital camera sitting on a desk. Each and every character in the game has his or her own walk, to help differentiate them from one another and give each their own physical personality. To turn this colossal amount of content into material that can actually be used in the game, the team outsourced more production work than any game studio before them. "There's simply no way we could do all of this ourselves," says Cage. "It would be impossible." The team brought in a 3D scanner to scan the faces of hundreds of people they found on the street, so as to populate their world with real people rather than clones. "We wanted to tell a real story with real characters," continues Cage. "This has never been done before, so we had to come up with our own solutions."

While gameplay still remains a somewhat hazy proposition, the simplicity of the user's interactions are demonstrated to us in a short demo the team created for the press (using one of the game's main characters, though none of its actual narrative). The scene has our female protagonist going to investigate a house belonging to a serial killer; gameplay involves figuring how to get into the house, exploring its contents; and then a series of rapid, sudden

movements to escape the premises when the killer unexpectedly returns home (think: *Dragon's Lair*, but more refined). As Cage mentioned, it's about choice and consequence; if you knock over a vase, the killer will come upstairs to find you (in fact, depending on the whims of his AI, he may come upstairs anyway). Tread carefully and you may be able to get out of the house without him even knowing you were there; do so too quickly, however, and you may not find the evidence you were looking for. It's looking to be accessible enough for non-gamers to play, and unobtrusive enough so as not to get in the way of the narrative. There's no heads-up display, no health bar, and no punch button.

Seeing *Heavy Rain* in development is a bit like seeing a film in production. We aren't made privy to the intricacies of the plotline—as with a film, this is out of the question. Rather, we're seeing the tools and the approach that the team is using to achieve its goals. One of the most impressive demonstrations came early on in the day, when Cage showed us several of the game's character models. The level of detail on the faces goes beyond what we've seen; while they're not out of the uncanny valley entirely, the last character, his ears and eyes shrouded in shadows, was quite literally indistinguishable from a real human actor. Make note: this is no small achievement.

Looking at the steps the developer is taking to achieve its goal, it's hard not to think about what it all means for games more broadly: Quantic Dream is in fact creating both a pipeline and a platform with which to tell all sorts of interactive stories. If nothing else, the demo makes one thing abundantly clear: like a good film or novel, *Heavy Rain*'s strength will rest in its ability to create compelling characters and weave them into a powerful, affecting storyline. This simple fact is one that belies the risk and reward of the project: if it succeeds, *Heavy Rain* could actually help usher in a new era of interactive cinema. If it fails, it will almost certainly help diminish one of the major bumps in the road of videogames' adolescence.

Actually, come to think of it, the couple in the room next door has us thinking of another option for this photorealistic game engine—something also for adults, and that might require a bit less narrative subtlety. Larry Flynt, you reading this?



The shadows of the crime scene.

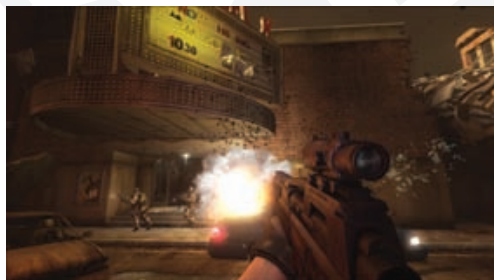




"The level of detail on the faces goes beyond what we've seen..."

Morgan '06





F.E.A.R. 2

Project Origin

A full-scale military assault on Silent Hill.

words Casey Loe

"While there are occasional pieces of written intel to find in the world of F.E.A.R. 2, its environments tell a phenomenal amount of story."



The original F.E.A.R. was buried by Gears of War when it landed on the 360, and its sequel seemed destined for an even graver fate, slated to ship against everything from Left 4 Dead and Dead Space to the newest installments of the Far Cry, Resistance, Gears of War and Call of Duty series. A delay till February gave the game some breathing room, but I'm beginning to doubt that it needed it at all. While we haven't played the full game yet, our limited preview of F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin revealed it to be packed with interesting features that give it a distinct enough identity to stand out from the shooter crowd.

The original F.E.A.R. had plenty of quiet moments, and a handful of good scares, but its sequel approaches Silent Hill-levels of tensions and suspense. One of the demo areas, set in an elementary school named for F.E.A.R.'s Harlan Wade, features a 20-minute stretch broken up by only a pair of brief but memorable encounters. Instead of constant combat, the thrills came from exploring an environment packed with jump-out-at-you scares and deep layers of backstory that are told entirely through exploration. Poking around in abandoned classrooms reveals creepy animated videos that instruct the students how to visit the nurse's office when their psychic powers grow out of control, and a series of seemingly innocuous illustrations of frogs and ladybugs that take on an ominous air when their meaning becomes clear in later chapters. While there are occasional pieces of written intel to find in the world of F.E.A.R. 2, its environments tell a phenomenal amount of story without forcing players to view lengthy dialogue scenes, play conveniently dropped tape





recorders, or read suspiciously informative diary entries. The few enemies in the elementary school are as flavorful as the level they haunt—a mentally shattered psychic who can turn the corpses of fallen soldiers into puppets to resist you, and a specter that repeatedly appears to terrify you until you manage to put it to rest. It's sort of like playing *Fatal Frame*, but with an automatic shotgun for a camera.

F.E.A.R. 2 has by no means abandoned its combat-focused roots in favor of horror-game thrills and *Bioshock*-style storytelling. The guns still feel great, and there's still thousands of enemy soldiers to squeeze the triggers at. The new cover system focuses not on finding cover, but on making it—bookshelves can be pulled down from walls and tables can be overturned in the heat of battle by both hero Michael Becket and those who oppose him. As in the previous installment, the A.I. is a cut above the norm, with enemies making dramatic scripted appearances, but then quickly adapting their behavior to counter your own tactics. A cautious player will find himself being flushed out by pairs of soldiers covering each other, while an aggressive one will find the same soldiers diving behind cover to withstand an assault. In addition to the familiar soldiers, super-soldiers, and piloted mechs, players will



face a menagerie of unusual new enemies, including experimental abominations that leap, climb and scurry like Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*, and the specters and psychic manifestations that were the maddened survivors of the first game's psychic holocaust.

"What we've found is that if you're constantly inundating a player with only one thing, it gets boring," explains Associate Producer Eric Studer. "If it's just combat, it's boring, if it's just story it's boring." While F.E.A.R. 2 gets plenty of mileage out of carefully mixing the two, they're not the only colors on the developer's palette. After a series of frenzied firefights, players can now step inside the super-powered EPA mechs that terrorized them in their first game, obliterating hundreds of soldiers—along with a few freeway on-ramps—with their unlimited supplies of Gatling-gun ammo and heat-seeking missiles. With most horror games thriving on feelings of powerlessness, it seems an odd choice to tilt



"The pathetically twisted Alma returns as the villain, now using her godlike psychic powers to toy with new hero Michael Becket..."



the odds so heavily in the player's favor, but Principal Game Designer Craig Hubbard isn't concerned that it will drain the tension from the experience. "Just like in tragedy you need comic relief, I think in horror you need tension release. If you're going to be tense all the time it's going to lose its effect after a while." Studer agrees. "It's a great way of really mixing up the pacing, so that when you get out of this, and you get off of that high of being unstoppable, you're really ready for what we're going to give you next." With as many twists in the mechanics as there are in the story, much of F.E.A.R. 2's appeal stems from the fact that you can never really guess what *will* happen next.

Whatever does happen, the developers are confident that this time, we'll actually be able to understand it. Only the most diligent fans were ever able to piece together the original F.E.A.R.'s narrative, but Studer promises that the story will be "much more transparent

to the player" this time around. The pathetically twisted Alma returns as the villain, now using her godlike psychic powers to toy with new hero Michael Becket, a Delta Force soldier who has attracted her attention for reasons that are not immediately clear. The beginning overlaps with the ending of the original F.E.A.R., and while the cast of that game will be "paid homage to," most won't appear, thanks to rights issues stemming from the split between developer Monolith and their former publishers at Vivendi. (Monolith and Warner Bros. have since bought back all those rights, but not until long after they designed the game around a new cast.) "There are tangible, real answers this time," promises Studer, including "everything about what Alma's doing." Of course, there will be plenty more questions that get asked but not answered...until F.E.A.R. 3, Alma-willing.





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DEADLY CREATURES

Who needs Spiderman?

words Dave Halverson

As hard to come by as fresh ideas are these days, especially ones with enough consumer appeal to make it onto store shelves, it's amazing that THQ has two of them in one year (a certain Blob comes to mind) and that nobody has thought of this before. Deadly Creatures pits Scorpion and Tarantula against a host of other insects and arachnids, but not in the usual video-game adaptation manner. Rather than suspend our disbelief with the usual power-ups and voice-overs, Deadly Creatures is an organic experience, other than the fact that we get to hear through them—got to have a story. And what a story it is. As you make your way fighting and traversing as arachnids do, which by the way is even creepier in a cool way than it sounds

(arachnophobiacs beware), there's an intermittent screenplay going on in the background starring Dennis Hopper and Billy Bob Thornton that takes on an entirely unique perspective from a Scorpion/Tarantula's point of view. There's a nice bit of Wii tech going on too. The arachnids, insects, vermin, and at least one big-'ol snake looked stunningly real and the textures look right out of the underground, abandoned old cars, and dusty old dwellings long forgotten. The lighting is also fit for a company called Rainbow. Sunlight gets diffused by particles and dust through small cracks, and beautiful skylines make surface crawling feel almost otherworldly. This is the kind of game that makes you think less about what the Wii can't do and more about what it can. Time to waggle once more...



INTERVIEW

Rainbow Studios Lead Game Designer Jordan Itkowitz, Art Director Brent Ashe, and Senior Game Designer Devin Knudsen talk about their first non-racing game, ever.

play: How did you come up with the concept of a Scorpion/Tarantula action adventure?

Jordan Itkowitz (Lead Game Designer): Oddly enough, it came from a dream I had. I was a snake, and I was controlling myself with the Wii Remote to stalk, strike at and devour a mouse. (Not sure what Freud would say about that). That was it, but I thought it'd make for an interesting hook.

From there, the team and I blew out this basic concept: Be a creepy predator, and emulate its attacks and abilities using the unique controls of the Wii.

We quickly discovered that a rattlesnake, while fascinating, didn't offer as many gameplay mechanics or opportunities as a creature like a tarantula or

scorpion, and so we turned it into a boss and focused on the two arachnids instead. The fact that these creatures all live in the Sonoran Desert, which is where Rainbow Studios is located [in Phoenix, AZ], was a nice coincidence as well.

At what point did the human story element come into the picture?

Brent Ashe (Art Director): There was always the intention to have human characters present throughout the experience. We were already doing a lot with manmade objects littered throughout the environments to sell the sense of scale, but the inclusion of human characters was initially quite passive in the overall



“We realized that we'd crafted something which felt a lot like a cool little indie movie, taking cues from Tarantino...”

narrative.

When we started talking more about the Gas Station owner (who eventually became Struggs) and his backstory, that really opened up the possibilities as to how he could be a consistent threat and presence throughout the game. Rather than having Struggs just mumble to himself while he was roaming around the desert, it made sense to have another character for him to play off of. We also made a very conscious choice to never deviate from the player's point of view, and so the idea of Struggs and Wade actively telling the story really took off.

How did you attract Billy Bob Thorton and Dennis Hopper to the project?

Jl: *Deadly Creatures* evolved in some unexpected directions throughout development, but this was something no one would have foreseen at the start of the project.

Once we had the script in place, we realized that we'd crafted something which felt a lot like a cool little indie movie, taking stylistic and narrative cues from Tarantino, Chris Nolan and the Coen Brothers. The new head of PD at THQ recognized that quality in our game as well, and since he has some ties in Hollywood, he made it happen.

Both actors were drawn to *Deadly Creatures'* originality, and suddenly, we had our Struggs and Wade.

How does their story factor into the game?

Jl: One of the biggest questions during pre-pro was “Why go on this journey?” Solely relying on a purely natural goal—i.e. hunt for food, hunt for a mate—seemed too dry and not compelling enough. That led us to start talking about wrapping this entire experience in a larger story, and it made perfect sense to tie the human world into that.

Throughout the game, you encounter these two men as they're searching for someone—or something—buried out in the desert. You never directly interact with them—we're telling their story from an arachnid-on-the-wall perspective, so to speak. And little by little, you piece their story together, and in ways that you couldn't do from a human perspective, since our creatures can go places that human eyes have never seen.

BA: Playing with two different protagonists also allowed us to tell this larger story from both creatures' perspectives, and at different times in the chronology. So you'll see one event from the Tarantula's point of view in one chapter, then witness the same event—but from a different location, with new information—in the next chapter as the Scorpion. There are many layers to unravel as you move through the overall progression, and we had a lot of fun staging all of these little revelations.



It's an interesting choice for Rainbow's first action game, and why do it on Wii exclusively? Strictly for the controller?

Devin Knudsen (Senior Game Designer): The Wii interface was an integral part of the original concept, and something we tried to stress whenever possible throughout the experience. Being able to lash out with your right hand to sting as the Scorpion, or pull apart the controllers to rip the wings off a wasp is just more satisfying when you're actually doing those gestures.

What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced dealing with realistic arachnids and vermin?

BA: Because these creatures are so familiar and widely recognized throughout the world, one of the biggest challenges was making sure that the final character models and textures remained true to expectations. We set out to create what we referred to as 'the perfect specimens' for the game. That meant exaggerating certain aspects of their morphology so that the silhouettes read clearly from any angle but didn't betray an expectation of accuracy or realism too greatly. One other big challenge was to maintain all of these traits while making sure the creatures weren't so photo-realistic that they didn't match the painterly stylization going on in the environments. We also wanted to make sure that anyone who had a degree of arachnophobia was getting their buttons pushed—the more creeped out people were getting, the more we knew we were on the right track.

The game looks amazing. Has Rainbow developed a proprietary Wii engine?

BA: We've developed an in-house engine and level editor that really facilitates a high degree of iteration. The level editor features a real-time update system for virtually every possible game asset, so everyone on



"We also wanted to make sure that anyone who had a degree of arachnophobia was getting their buttons pushed..."

the team was able to polish their work in a way that wouldn't have been possible otherwise.

Since you're dealing with realistic characters, how do you evolve the action? Do the same moves apply for the duration?

DK: No, as you progress through each creature's adventure you unlock new attacks and abilities.

The Tarantula, which is a more agile hunter, learns stealth-based attacks like web shot (fire a web of sticky silk at an enemy and trap it in place), pounce (leap onto an enemy from a far-off hiding spot), web jump (zipline from web to web to explore new, hard-to-reach areas of the world), and more.

The Scorpion, which is a more brutal, in-your-face combatant, starts with basic pincer combos and a sting. Later moves include more damaging combos, a wide-sweeping Tail Whip, and the Burrow Strike, which allows you to strike up at charging enemies from beneath the sand.

Both creatures also unlock venom attacks, which are risky to pull off, but poison your attackers with damage-over-time. Given the differences in combat style between the Tarantula and Scorpion, you'll need to come up with different strategies when fighting the spiders, lizards and rats that infest the desert.

Have you developed a new respect for the creepy crawlies that live among us? It's a violent little world isn't it?

JL: Yeah, humans do some pretty awful things to each other, but at least we don't paralyze our enemies and implant our eggs in their bodies so that our babies have a live, helpless victim to eat when they hatch. Although I do think I saw that once on *The Real Housewives of Orange County*.

How are you handling the segues between the Tarantula and Scorpion and do they cover the same terrain?

JL: At the start of the game, we set up a rivalry between the Tarantula and Scorpion. You spend the first chapter as the Tarantula, tracking down the Scorpion to finish the fight. You almost defeat it, but it wriggles into a crack and escapes underground. From there, we jump to Chapter 2 and pick up with the Scorpion as it makes its way back to the surface. We continue this back-and-forth throughout the game's 10 chapters, occasionally crossing paths again and then tying up both creatures' journeys with a two-part boss battle at the Gas Station.

While you do visit some areas of the desert as both creatures, your different abilities allow you to take different paths. These lead to other areas that are unique to each playable character.

The snake that I saw was impressive. Are there other larger reptiles or creatures in the game?

BA: Early in development, we knew it was important to set up rivals for the Tarantula and Scorpion. For the Tarantula it was the Rattlesnake, and for the Scorpion we chose the Gila Monster. We took some behavioral liberties with the Gila Monster (they're quite benign and reclusive in real life) and turned him into our version of a Cave Troll—a giant, pissed off juggernaut that doesn't want you around.

We placed the Tarantula and Scorpion right in the middle of the food chain, so there are several other creatures that don't dwarf them like the Rattlesnake and Gila Monster do, but they definitely pose a significant threat. Be on the lookout for other reptiles like Horned Lizards and Leopard Lizards as well as larger insect foes like the Praying Mantis and Tarantula Hawk. And of course, a colony of nasty Rats living in the junkyard.

Lastly, the biggest and nastiest creature in the game is, of course, George Struggs, and the player will definitely see him up close and personal.

People complain a lot about game length these days. Seems like anything under 8 hours is considered too short, especially if there's limited replay value. Of course, there's only so much content a typical studio can create in an 18-24 month time frame. How do you approach game length and replayability?

JL: I don't know if agree with that—I think it's the experience that matters. If it's a tight, well-crafted experience, I feel like I've just come off a great ride. And it's a good length so that if I want to have that experience again, I can easily dive back into it.

If the game hits big, do you see Rainbow pursuing other nature-based games or is this a one shot deal? Tarantula vs. Scorpions racing game on the way?

JL: There's more we can do to make our Tarantula and Scorpion even deadlier—or we can attack some larger predators in future versions as well. Hopefully *Deadly Creatures* does well enough so that we can start looking at those possibilities.

For 360 and PS3 is it racing business as usual or might Rainbow develop a next-gen original action game?

JL: Rainbow's been a racing house for a long time—and we'll always have those projects—but no one ever thought our first non-racing title would be a creepy Wii action-thriller where you become a pair of savage arachnid predators. So who knows where the future will take us...



Lord of the Rings: Conquest

Hobbit-forming gameplay

words Matt Cabral

Despite possessing a following rivaling George Lucas's faux lightsaber-wielding fanbase, a license to print money, and a vein that could be endlessly tapped for high-fantasy hack-and-slash fare, the Lord of the Ring's franchise spawned surprisingly few videogames. Oh sure, we've got Tactics on the PSP, Battle for Middle Earth II on consoles, and LotR: Online for the PC. But cerebral strategy and MMO raids isn't exactly what we had in mind; we've been enjoying "next-gen" gaming for three years, yet we're still waiting for a decapitate-first-strategize-later action/adventure reminiscent of last gen's hack-heavy The Two Towers or The Return of the King...until now.

The geek-wish-granting Pandemic Studios is applying their talent for recreating large-scale battles

(last seen in their Star Wars: Battlefront games) to Tolkien's rich universe. But Conquest is much more than Battlefront re-skinned with trolls and broadswords. The title bleeds with the same cinematic style that saw us paying an extra fiver to watch the film trilogy unfold on IMAX; battle-scarred fields, overcast skies swarming with fire-breathing beasts, and snow-capped peaks highlight the title's beautiful environments. But don't enjoy the scenery too long, lest you end up a smudge on the bottom of an Oliphant's ground-shaking hoof. The only thing as epic as the scenery are the massive good-versus-evil melees that'll take you through richly realized versions of Helm's Deep, The Black Gate, Mines of Moria, and several other sprawling fantasy locales from the books and films (EA smartly snagged the rights to both.)



"As with Battlefront, the multiplayer is a balls-to-the-wall blast.."

Suiting-up as a mage, warrior, archer, or scout, you'll have access to the expected assortment of blades, bows, and spells—triggered by satisfying, combo-heavy button-based controls—but aside from cutting a bloody swath through throngs of trolls and orcs, Conquest adds some more intimate moments. A quick-time event will find brave battlers scaling the aforementioned tusk-baring behemoths, repeatedly plunging a blade into their thick skulls, and sliding down their trunks to safety. And the more traditional slicing and dicing is also broken up by completing mission objectives, requiring you find a delicate balance between saving your ass and reaching the ultimate goal. Keeping the ugly hordes at bay is certainly important if you wish to keep your head attached to your shoulders, but completing your mission specific tasks—like burning siege towers to the ground—remains the priority if you plan on winning the bigger battle.

A thumb numbing solo campaign, which sees you switching to Sauron's side about halfway through (we can't wait to tear up the Shire as a Balrog) would be enough to keep us happier than a ring-destroying Frodo. However, Conquest shines like the golden embers of Mount Doom when you take its screen-stretching battles online. As with Battlefront, the multiplayer is a balls-to-the-wall blast, featuring epic encounters that wouldn't be out of place on the silver screen, and multiple modes supporting 16-player versus and 4-player co-op. Our favorite, Ringbearer, has one player hoofin' it as the hairy-footed Frodo, while the rest hunt him down as Ringwraiths—capture the do-gooding Hobbit, and you take his place as protector of the ring. The packed slate of online and local options, visceral ranged and melee combat, eye-scorching environments and intricately detailed enemies (you'll be tempted to check yourself for snot after an Oliphant snorts at you), and most of all, the ability to stomp Hobbits in the evil campaign, has us sharpening our double-edged battle axes in anticipation for Conquest's early '09 arrival.



"The brooding, ominous environments simply heave with ambiance..."

Killzone 2

Finally in the Zone...

words Evan Shamoon

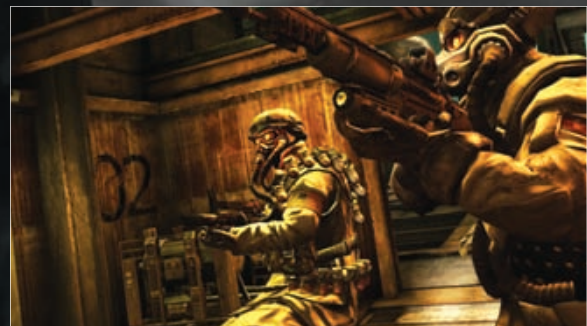
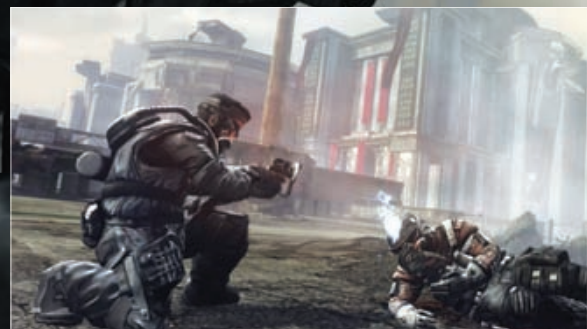
When Killzone 2's first trailer debuted at E3 2006, it was heralded as proof positive that the PlayStation 3 represented the true next generation of videogames—it looked every bit as good as the CG seen in high-end films, and almost too good to be true. Shortly thereafter, it was revealed that the game was, in fact, prerendered CG (that is to say, not the actual game running on PS3 hardware) and, indeed, too good to be true. It was quickly and rather universally agreed upon that the trailer represented an underhanded marketing stunt by Sony, meant to falsely whet the market's taste for a console that was quickly losing mindshare to Xbox 360.

"It was our target video", says Steven Ter Heide, Killzone 2's senior producer of the trailer. "We were confident that the PlayStation 3 was capable of running something that looked like that, and we were capable of delivering that kind of experience." We're sitting in an office at Guerrilla HQ, which has made its surprisingly cozy home inside a former bank building in the heart of Amsterdam, Holland. It's dark and rainy outside, but we can still see the streetlights reflecting off the surface of the canals that run through the city and give it a quite otherworldly charm. "We set high standards for ourselves, and I think we've gotten close to our original goal."

It's not clear whether or not all of the media attention prompted Sony to spend more money and resources on the game than initially intended. But whatever the reason, more than two years later, Killzone 2 looks superb—certainly not as good as

the original trailer, but closer than we expected. The game uses the PS3 hardware in ways that no other games have to date: there are often hundreds of individual light sources in any given shot, ranging from the individually glowing eyes of the Helghast soldiers to the landing lights of the small, Sentinel-like flying machines that hover about, attempting to stop you dead in your tracks at every turn. It is a dense world populated by layers of graphical detail.

The brooding, ominous environments simply heave with ambiance; like the first game, this is an experience dipped in concrete and iron, with caked-on layer of grit and more shades of gray than an Alfred Hitchcock movie. (In fact, the team used some rather inventive filters to simulate the analog scratchiness of film grain). The imposing buildings were modeled after the cheap, mass-produced housing of industrial inspirations like Hong Kong and East Berlin, where constant renovation is economically preferable to building anew. "In places like these, the housing gets transformed so much over time that you get a real feeling of history," says Guerrilla art director Jan-Bart van Beek. Indeed, even more convincingly than those of Gears of War, the environments feel worn and ravaged, like the war you're fighting in is not the first they've been witness to. The cityscapes are organic and cluttered, and give the game a real sense of place. Getting to this place wasn't easy, however: In order to achieve the distinctive look, the team needed more power—literally having to helicopter a diesel generator into their building midway through development.





The eyes tell of a man's soul...



But all of these graphical niceties are there to further the game's main conceit: to put the player in the action like never before. "The most important thing for us has been achieving a combination of action, realism, and intensity," says game director Mathijs de Jonge. "We spent lots of time making the game more immersive for the player." This included removing some of the game's original third-person elements; the entire experience now takes place from the first-person perspective, including the Rainbow Six-inspired cover system. The developer found itself more confident in the development of *Killzone 2* than it did the original; this was the first Guerrilla game where the team took the extra time to tune and sign off on its gameplay and level designs before creating the relevant art. "Part of my job was to see the potential of stuff before it's made nice and pretty," says de Jonge. "If it's not fun to play, it's not going to be fun when it looks great."

Picking up the controls and delving into its single-player campaign, it's clear that the team is very much aiming to make its own game. The play feels heavy and deliberate, significantly slower and more realistic than games like *Halo* or *Resistance 2*. There's more heft to the weapons, most of which kick like an angry Dutch mule. There's a rather destructive flamethrower (which de Jonge claims the team had to tone down, for fear that it was actually *too* realistic

in its original form), the kind of shotgun that definitely keeps Helghast off the front porch, and 14 other weapons to keep things interesting. The team put a huge amount of time into refining the subtle ways in which you fire and carry each and every one of these death sticks, and in the process giving each its own personality. And it takes some getting used to.

Which hints at something larger: this is a game that goes to great lengths to fashion its own character, and the team has focused its energies to this end. The graphics, the weapons, the controls—despite the game falling into arguably the most established of modern-day genres, each feels distinctive and new. It's a personality that's slightly foreign to eager American audiences—the refined, almost cold consistency of Dutch design shows through in nearly every aspect of *Killzone 2*. There are progressive elements: You can pilot powerful, lumbering mecha (one of the game's true joys), and the class system and customization options that are so much a part of the multiplayer experience will give online gamers plenty to sink their teeth into. Does it look like a Pixar movie? No. Is it the next evolution of videogames? Certainly not. But *Killzone 2* is a work of passion, and we're looking forward to exploring the many cracks in its towering, infernal façade.

Alpha Protocol

Secret agents

words Brady Fletcher

Developed by the guys who brought you *Knights of the Old Republic II* and *Neverwinter Nights 2*, this modern-era action role-playing game takes place through the eyes of a young spy caught up in a nasty conspiracy. Gadgets, action, spy stuff—in a more traditional role-playing guise. Definitely something you haven't quite seen before in the genre. Not a whole lot has been revealed on *Alpha Protocol*, so we took the time to speak to a few creatives from Obsidian for the details . . .

interview

Ryan Rucinski Senior Producer at Obsidian Entertainment
Matthew Rorie Marketing Producer at Obsidian Entertainment
Chris Parker Project Lead for *Alpha Protocol*

play: I've seen *Alpha Protocol* described as a "spy espionage role-playing" game. Let's get creative here: break down the broader essence of the game, what's *Alpha Protocol* about beyond the spy and espionage bulletpoint?

MR: Beyond the genre or setting, *Alpha Protocol* is really all about empowering player choice and making those choices matter in the game world. We've shied away from the standard good/evil dichotomy in favor of a world with many shades of grey, so the player is going to have some tough choices to make as he or she proceeds throughout. And we're really proud of the fact that the choices have very perceptible consequences, which sometimes are immediately noticeable, but which sometimes don't come into play until hours later in the game. **Just how much is the role-playing a focus in *Alpha Protocol*?**

RR: RPG elements permeate everything that is *Alpha Protocol*. Everything from how you build your character to what decisions you make factors into what happens in the game. Even the different skills the player has chosen to improve can be brought into play in conversations that take place.

This is an interesting setting for the kind of game you're trying to make . . .

RR: Thanks! Unfortunately I can't take credit for any of it. The inspiration began with a discussion between Chris Jones and Feargus Urquhart over lunch one day. That eventually turned into a proposal and then into *Alpha Protocol*.

CP: After starting to research the proposal we were a little surprised to realize there really hadn't been an RPG that focused on modern-day espionage. Regardless, we thought it was cool and it became a unanimous decision

"So a good gadget for AP should support the player's ability to choose his or her own path through any given encounter."

to go forward. Sega thankfully saw and approved the vision and "viola," the game went to the design stage.

How has your experience with *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Neverwinter Nights* informed certain design decisions?

CP: Our dialogue system is based on the dialogue systems we used in those games and builds upon the systems we've used there. I think we mostly have switched from interrogation-based to natural conversation, without looping back through a central node; it may not seem like much, but it adds tension to the conversation. At the same time, our RPG systems, while created from scratch, have been heavily influenced by all of the RPGs we've made over the years.

You've added a timer to bring what looks like a sense of urgency to the dialog trees. What are you trying to accomplish with that choice?

RR: There are several reasons for the timer on dialogue

sequences. One of the goals was to make the player think about their actions as if they were in the shoes of Michael Thorton, and how those decisions would unfold in real-time, where thinking on your feet is required.

Another reason was for a seamless cinematic purpose. It makes the dialogue flow very naturally when there are no breaks or loops. Finally, we wanted the players to make choices on how they think they would respond in that situation. Sure, the player can decide to not make a choice and leave it automatically play their last emotive response but we do not let the player do a conversation over and over again hoping to get that last bit of information because we present results in a way that there is no wrong choice.

Gadgets are a big part of the game. What makes a good gadget?

MR: Well, we really wanted to stick to the "almost the real world" design that we were working with when designing our gadgets. You're not going to have a watch with a laser that can cut through handcuffs, and you're not going to be using nanotech machines to turn your enemies into soup or anything outlandish like that. A good gadget in Alpha Protocol's world should be applicable in multiple situations, and allow the player to affect an encounter's result in a unique way. So instead of sneaking past a group of enemies, or running up to them and blasting them with a shotgun, you might be able to shock them with an electrical trap, or use a noisemaker to lure them out of your path, or set a mine and lure them onto it. So a good gadget for AP should support the player's ability to choose his or her own path through any given encounter.

Are you treading more into realms of fantasy or harsh reality?

RR: I would say that it is definitely more towards harsh reality with a small sprinkling of fantasy. Bourne, Bauer, and Bond all have their bit of influences but so have so many other movies, books, and shows. It would be hard to choose any single one of them as the most significant contributor. To add to the harsh reality we don't have a lot of "magic-y" stuff going on. The items and equipment are all realistic in nature and nothing that would come off as impossible. We do brush up with fantasy elements when we use high-end special abilities and boss-like characters but those are for gaming purposes and not otherworldly magic or enemies.

Getting past that Bourne or Bond descriptor, how do you maintain an identity of your own?

CP: One of the most important things to realize is that you don't make Bond or Bauer or Bourne, you combine a variety of espionage-type skills and the personality you want to pursue, and you create your own spy, your own identity. That's what an RPG is all about. So while it's easy for people to grasp the "3 JB's" we don't use them internally much and our goals don't necessarily embody them perfectly in the game.

RR: With excellent writing we made it so

that we allow the player to make an identity of *their* own. Using tons of design experience from past RPG games like KotOR2, and NWN2 and the expansions we made sure to instill memorable story and emotional moments that have become our signature.

Explain how your stats system works.

CP: There are a lot of things that the player customizes. There are options for how Thorton looks, he has ten different espionage skills, three of which you can specialize in, there are tons of weapons, armor, and gadgets, most of which have upgrade possibilities, and how you interact with most characters and factions in the game affects what takes place in the story. There are a lot of options for the player.

RR: Common to most RPGs, you get advancement points as you accomplish tasks. The advancement points are used to increase your skills which increase your stats and abilities. The abilities that can be achieved are sometimes passive and sometimes activated, and some of them are pretty epic in nature.

After the player has completed several missions, they are able to select what they want to specialize in - those skills will be able to be improved to even greater levels than the rest.

The freedom to make choices in the game, to play the good guy or bad guy role in key moments, how much do you want those choices to effect the progression and final outcome?

RR: The choices in the game start almost from the very beginning. Without giving away too much information on how the end will turn out I can say that we thoroughly expect many of the gamers to compare stories and have almost nothing in common with each other.

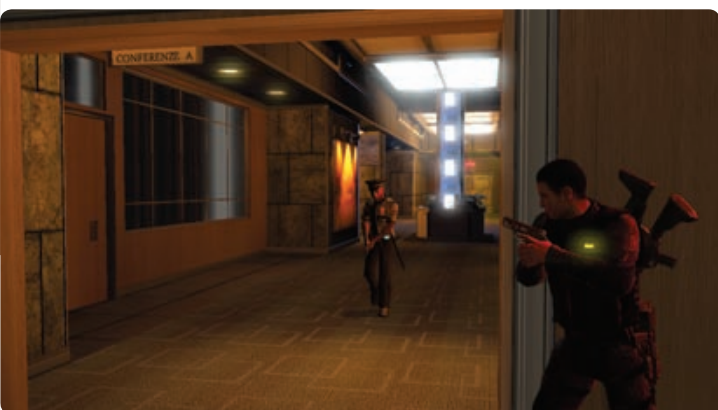
Alpha Protocol allows the players to literally change how the ending will unfold because of all their choices during the game.

How do you make a player feel like a capable spy in a game world?

MR: The challenge has not only been making the player feel like a capable spy, but also in allowing different players to feel capable in different ways. For instance, some players will enjoy using stealth to sneak by groups of enemies, while others will want to take a more direct approach. Our skill advancement system allows players to increase their efficacy in abilities that they enjoy using, such that they fire more accurately and with greater power with their pistol as they level that skill up, for example. However, we also want to give them some ultra-powerful abilities that let them feel like a complete badass every once in a while. So, a pistol specialist will eventually be able to snap out of cover and take down multiple enemies in a split-second's worth of time using his Chain Shot ability. Players who don't specialize in pistols won't be able to use this ability, but they'll gain equally cool abilities for the skills that they do choose to specialize in.

A spy is only as good as his tactics, not his brute force. What's the balance there?

CP: I think any seasoned player is going to use tactics to understand any given situation prior to going in. Then depending on their character build, they're going to approach it however it makes the most sense. I think the balance is in understanding the most likely tactics of the different character builds, and then making sure at least most of them are accounted for in each situation. If we've done that properly, it's pretty easy for us to make the enemies fairly difficult for the player, and force them to play wisely. For example, in most combats, in the current build, if you stand out in the open in sight of a single enemy, that enemy kills you in three to six seconds—obviously more enemies would take you down much faster. So trying to brute force every situation isn't going to be very easy. But when you use your special abilities and items, are smart about staying out of lines of fire, use the mission specific options, and play to your character's skills, you will be able to whoop up on most of the enemies in the game.

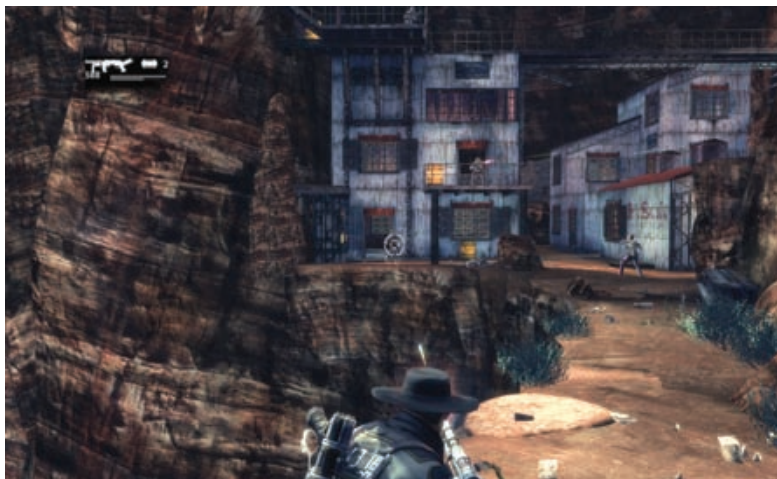


Damnation

Run-and-gun goes scale-and-shoot



words Matt Cabral



If you've heard anything about Blue Omega Entertainment's forthcoming alternate American history actioner *Damnation*, it's that it's a "shooter gone vertical." In fact, the title's developers have done everything but slap this marketing mantra on a bumper sticker. A few minutes spent with this skyward shooter, though, and you'll understand their geometry-driven enthusiasm. As man-in-the-black-hat Hamilton Rourke, players scale, shimmy, jump, zip-line, and vault just as often as they engage in chaotic firefights a la *Gears of War*. The idea is to evolve the usual run-and-gun (and stop-and-pop) experiences past the expected ground-based battles. So, while filling baddies full of lead with your steampunk-infused firearms on flat land is perfectly acceptable, more creative gunslingers might discover a several-stories-high rooftop and sniper rifle more effective.

During a recent multiplayer event, we found this scale-and-shoot approach just as satisfying in the online arena as in the acrophobia-inducing solo campaign. Working scalable vertical structures into the maps actually made the mechanic more a strategy-deepening element than a fun gimmick. Combining Spirit Vision (the ability to spy threats through solid objects) with the freedom to climb as high as the



game's towering structures allow, definitely makes for some interesting encounters; spotting a baddie up above, climbing just outside their hiding spot, then crashing through a window—in total Hollywood cowboy fashion—before feeding them a shotgun blast to the face, offered a creative thrill kill we can't say we've experienced in any other game.

Additionally, multiplayer modes that have grown increasingly stale in other online arenas take on new life when acrobatics are added to the fray. King of the Hill, for example, becomes a more literal experience when holding said "hill" means standing your ground on a vertigo-inducing platform that's closer to the heavens than the ground below. Similarly, Capture the Flag has you incorporating moves that'd be more familiar to Lara Croft than Master Chief, as agility trumps aim when the flag's planted on a sky-reaching peak.

Despite having a killer time with the platforming crossed with firefights formula, we did encounter a few issues that'll hopefully be ironed out before the game ships. For example, frequent bottomless-pit deaths may be a necessary evil of Damnation's fresh approach, but we're hoping the overpowered melee kill is just a matter of balancing. Flaws aside, we look forward to engaging in more Prince of Persia-meets-Marcus Fenix action when Damnation climbs onto consoles later this year.

"...Capture the Flag has you incorporating moves that'd be more familiar to Lara Croft than Master Chief..."

The only way to fly.



Cave Story

Pixel Perfect

words Heather Anne Campbell



It's been almost three years since I first played Cave Story, and for the last two-and-a-half years, the Grassland theme song has been my ring-tone. Recommended to me after a bad break-up, Cave Story is a strangely melancholic 2-D platformer in the vein of Castlevania or Metroid . . . and I have been in love with it since the first time I downloaded it.

That's right. Cave Story was originally a freeware PC/Mac game, developed by independent designer/musician/artist Daisuke Amaya. Known on the internet simply as "Pixel," Amaya developed the game in his spare time, and released it with quiet modesty in 2004. An English fan translation of the game followed, and soon the title was the darling of the independent game scene.

Now, when someone says freeware, we can't help but envision half-finished, well-intended games that suffer from rusty edges. Freeware titles are something packaged on PC CD-ROM collections in the mid-nineties, their cracked jewel-cases crammed into budget bins at Electronics Boutique. Few of us think of well-polished, emotionally resonant games that simply *feel* like full-on studio productions. But that's what Cave Story is. It's a conversion game; after playing it, you'll never think of independent software the same way again.

And that's why it's coming to WiiWare.

Tyrone Rodriguez, Producer of the Wii version, was a fan of Cave Story for a long time. Part of the reason he wants to bring it to the Nintendo console is to get

people to play it.

"It wasn't about getting a commercial release. There's money involved, but that's secondary. There are so many people who won't play it—won't download it.

Rodriguez explains, "Indie games are cool, but they're rarely a full experience. But I downloaded it, and I got the first gun, and thought, this game *feels* cool, it looks cool. It reminds me . . . of a really high-end NES game, like the kind that used the MMC chips."

"The joke I make is that it's a 12-bit game," he smiles.

"Once I started playing it, I literally couldn't stop. It was obviously designed by somebody who was in love with—grew up with NES games, who really has an appreciation, and more importantly an understanding of how these games are made."

Still, why would anyone pay for a game that you can get for free? I'll answer that one: The game is so good, you want to give something back. Cave Story is something you're *personally proud* of. You want to share it with friends that might not like to play a game on a keyboard. And it certainly doesn't hurt that the Wii version is getting overhauled graphics, remixed music (the music, by the way, is incredible), and *new downloadable content*. Hard core fans can switch the graphics and soundtrack back to the original *on the fly*, or replay the platformer with new sprites to endings they may not have unlocked before. Cave Story is a long and difficult game, and there's more than one way to finish it, after all.

A quick plot summary: You are Quote, a hat-wearing soldier with amnesia. Waking up in a cave, Quote soon discovers the world of the Mimigas—a race of fuzzy rodents who have been struggling against a mad Doctor and his servants. When the Doctor's servants kidnap a Mimiga, Quote heads off to unravel the mystery of her disappearance . . . and discover the history of the world he inhabits along the way. Like Megaman with heart, Cave Story isn't just an adventure. It's a tragedy, as well. Cave Story is softened by a sense of loss.

"Just in the first level, Amaya said he wanted to create a sense of stress and anxiety that new games just don't have."

Players have become so passionate about the world of Cave Story that Rodriguez is nervous of offending them. "My concern," he says, "is that people would think of us as an evil company trying to commercialize it. But every single thing I want to do to the game, I ask [Amaya] about, personally. We work hand-in-hand."

"Amaya redrew the major characters, he redid most of the graphics."

Cave Story's creator is notoriously modest, and hard to track down. Rodriguez was kind enough to put us in touch with him for a brief interview on the background of Cave Story . . . as well as some of the places he pulls from for inspiration.

Interview

The One-Man Studio: Pixel

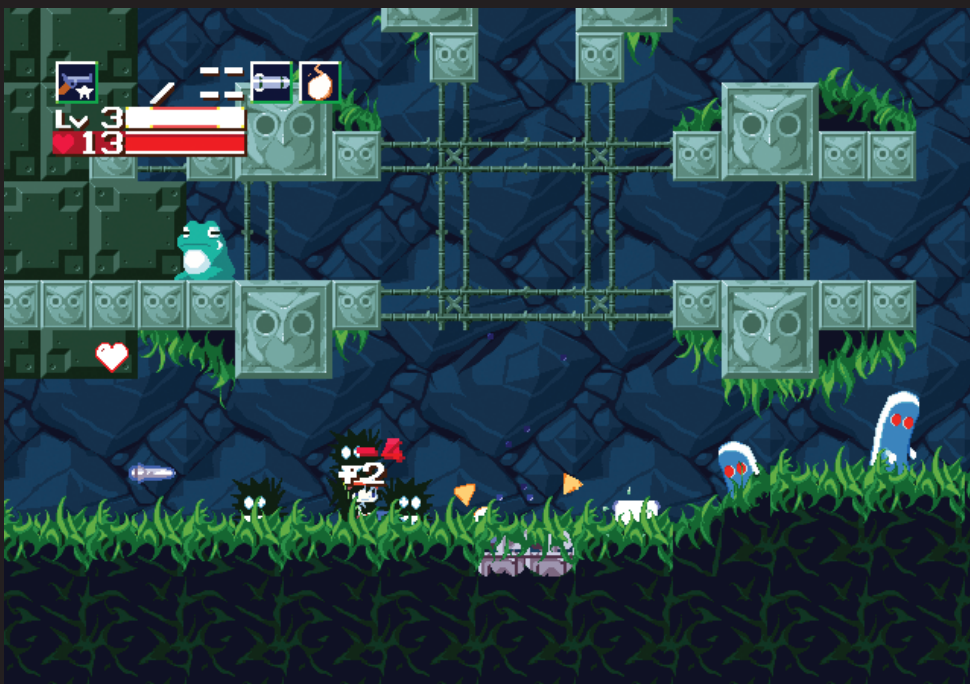
play: How long did it take you to develop Cave Story for the PC? I've read that it was around seven years—is this correct?

Pixel: If you count the time before the game had a name then yes, it's seven years. Originally, I wasn't able to complete development of Cave Story the first time around because I didn't have enough experience programming. After that, I started making games that were on a much smaller scale. I did this to gain the necessary know-how to make Cave Story. At that time, I completed another game, Ikachan. After Ikachan I started making the game you now know as Cave Story.

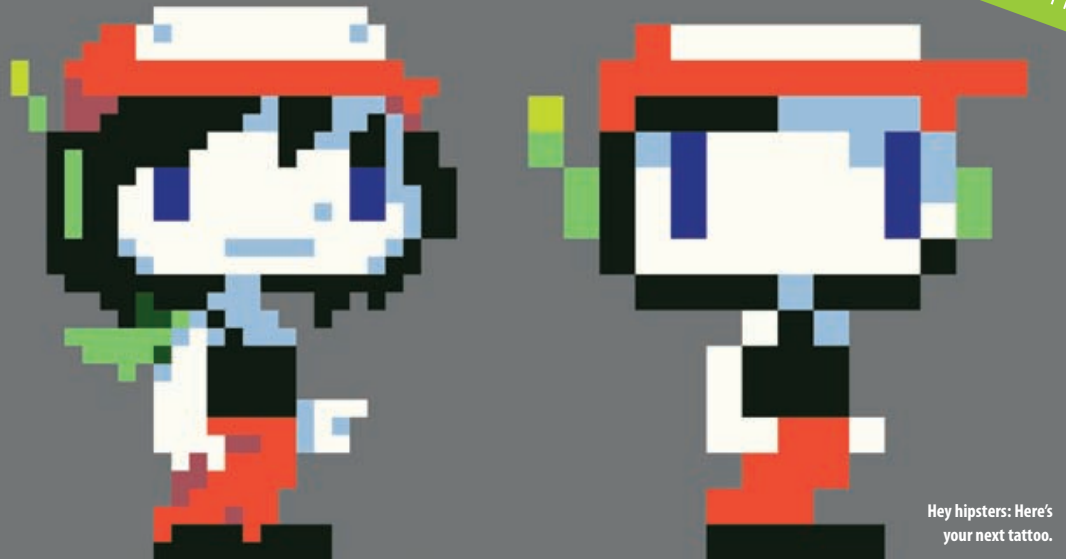
I don't think I tried my best at first. The pace of my work, initially, was very slow and I didn't work too hard on the project. When the final game was almost done I had a request from a friend, who was a tester. The request was a bit of a challenge, but it was fun. In the end, I was able to finish development of the game and was very satisfied with the work.

How does that compare with the work you're putting into the re-vamped Wii version?

to be continued on page 060



"The first thing I made for Cave Story was the music. When I'd finish composing a song I liked, I'd make the other elements around it."



Hey hipsters: Here's your next tattoo.



ケのQ太郎 (known as Chubby Cherub in the US), Super Mario Bros., ガーディック外伝 (The Guardian Legend), さんまの名探偵, Wizardry, Ninja JaJaMaru-kun, Star Soldier and Dragon Quest II and III.

For the GameBoy I'd say Mario Land and a few titles you've never heard of like 魔界塔士SaGa and ネコじゃら物語. On the Super Famicom (you called it the Super Nintendo) they'd be Final Fantasy V, Puyo Puyo, Super Metroid, Prince of Persia and Mario Kart. These are in no particular order.

I didn't have Famicom at home when I was a kid. That's why most of the time I went to my friend's house—so that I could play Famicom. Super Mario Bros. was shocking. Even now when I see the logo or see the yellow cassette (the original Famicom cart) it makes me excited. Recently, I found the old Super Mario cassette at a used game store. I don't feel like playing it, like before. I used to want to play all the time, but not so much right now.

Which games are you playing now?

Right now it's Mother for Famicom and Grand Theft Auto for the PS2—my younger brother gave it to me. When I have time, I play them little by little.

Who are your art influences?

I don't have any specific art influences, but a lot of art in general has inspired me. For me, I like art whether it's music, paintings, cartoons—even if I don't know who the creator may be.

Which artists inspire you?

I love to karaoke and listened to Mr. Children or Bz and スピッツ. I haven't played many games lately, but before I'd find free games on the Internet. Seeing freeware games would inspire me.

What is the CD in your stereo right now/most recently played MP3 on your MP3 player?

It's empty right now. I haven't listened to music much lately. My free time is usually at night and my CD player is in the baby's room. She's sleeping at night so I don't get much time to listen to music. But the last music I listened to is Eyebrow from Hi-Fi Set.

Finally, what is your favorite movie? Or at least . . . a favorite movie?

Hmm, a movie. The Game with Michael Douglas. It has nothing to do with videos games at all though, but I really liked it and have watched it twice.



My life has completely changed from when I created Cave Story. Now, I have a wife and baby so I don't have a lot of time on my own. I don't have as much time to think about games as I used to.

But in a way, I'm doing the same thing as before. I still have a limited amount of time to work. Right now, I'm working on the pixel art for the Wii version of Cave Story and while I'm doing the new artwork I can lose track of time easily.

Do you own a Wii? How much gaming do you do?

I actually don't own a Wii, but I'll probably buy one sooner than later. I've been playing a bit of games lately, about half an hour to an hour worth of Mother for the Famicom. I have a good time playing it.

Which came first, the story of Cave Story, or the game-play elements? Did you have a vision for a world you wanted to create, or did you think first about the mechanics of the game?

The first thing that I made for Cave Story was the music. When I'd finish composing a song that I liked, I'd make the other elements around it.

Of course, I'd think about the story and the gameplay elements before creating the game, but most of the time it wouldn't necessarily work right. When I'd make something, it wouldn't be that good or I'd get bored. I didn't have a plan, I'd make the game when a good idea would come to me. I wouldn't think too far ahead and concentrated mainly on whatever I'd be working on at the time.

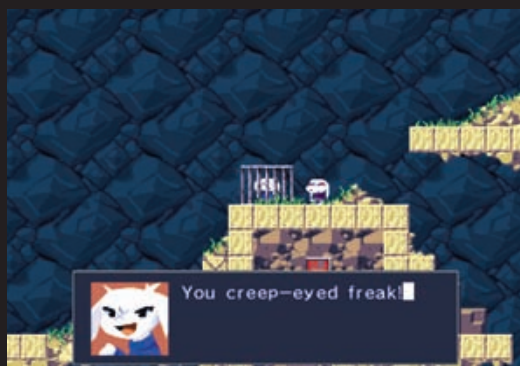
Did you have a vision for a world you wanted to create, or did you think first about the mechanics of the game?

I didn't have a vision for the world. Cave Story is like a new world to me still. As I mentioned, I wouldn't think too far ahead—I just created as I went along.

About the mechanics, I definitely thought about what I wanted. And that was that I wanted—to make it as easy as possible to play the game. I'm not good at learning and really wanted to complete the game.

Would you share some of your favorite games of the past?

There have been a lot of games in the past that have given me good memories. For the Famicom it was オバ



The House of the Dead Overkill

This old House

words Dave Halverson

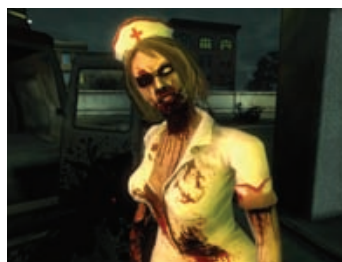
Rounding up cadavers for a second dose of The House of the Dead on Wii less than a year after the double shot of Houses 2 and 3 might seem like overkill, until you see Overkill. To say that this is a departure from the classic Japanese light-gun shooter where scary monsters and zombies pop out of the woodwork for a quick bullet to the brain would be the understatement to beat all

understatements to a bloody pulp.

I've seen enough scratchy Grindhouse-style promos to make Quentin Tarantino consider remaking Benji, but by the time Agent Washington emptied his first clip, I knew that the series had taken a dramatic turn to the dark and bloody side. In the first place, these zombies are either bleeding profusely or covered in blood (sloppy eaters) before you even begin pumping

rounds into them, and seem especially agitated. The movement is still on rails but the pace gives you more of an on-foot sensation than the usual funhouse track. You can also drag the reticule hard right or left and make a quarter turn to look for various hidden hamburger helpers, like the swirling green icon for slowing down time—useful considering not all of these undead necessarily lumber. This build in particular took place at the Bayou County General Hospital where Mr. Grindhouse states, "The symptoms are cold sweats, irregular heartbeat...anxiety. The diagnosis; bleeding horror that cuts like a scalpel to the heart. There is only one cure...a white hot bullet to the brain!" Time to gather the family around the Wii again! Aside from the usual flow of interns, doctors, naughty nurses and a patient or ten, something wicked my way showed up in a pitch black corridor that looked more like a resident of Silent Hill than The House of the Dead and let out a primal scream that drowned out the trademark Sega arcade porn-music and blew out more glass than Hans Gruber. Something tells me that these UK blokes take their zombie splattering very seriously. The grossout meter on this one is pegged from the get go. I shot at a nurses leg and almost felt guilty. In any other THOTD she'd have went "uuugh" (zombie for "okay, now I'm pissed") and not even broken stride but dang, it nearly came off, made a horrible mess and dropped her like a bad habit. She still tried to eat my brain of course—you can't keep a good zombie nurse down—so I had to pump one into her once- lovely visage anyway. Sure is nice having a semi-automatic and a shotgun from the get go. A dead-on headshot with the hand gun in Overkill will give you some large chunks of skull but with the shotgun

"I've seen enough scratchy Grindhouse-style promos to make Quentin Tarantino consider remaking Benji..."



it's like setting a C4 charge in a fresh pumpkin. The Wii-Zapper is a fine hand cannon, although the Wii-Remote does a great job too. It's super quick on the reload (by hitting 'A' or a simple shake) and you can dual-wield. So—Old House, new rules: Drop-in-or-out anytime co-op, sickening malformed mutants, four-letter words a-flyin', zombie strippers...what more could Wii ask for?



HOW MUCH
OF A GOOD THING
IS TOO MUCH?

YEAH...STUPID QUESTION

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Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: I don't take reviewing games lightly—no sree. I get deep into a game in accord with the audience the developer is aiming to gratify, and then review from that perspective with an eye on design, artistry, animation, attention to detail, physics, audio, and functionality.

Brain Drain: I love this time of year, finally getting the time to play all of the games that I didn't work on or have time for during the year, along with all of the holiday blockbusters, although this year's batch seems a bit on the lite side. Prince of Persia is the big surprise so far but Gears 2, Mirror's Edge, LittleBigPlanet and Tomb Raider Underworld are all up there, and the more I play Fable 2 the more I like it. I also find myself replaying a lot of Beast Rider, No More Heroes, Ninja Gaiden 2... it's been a great year for action games.

Game of the Month: Prince of Persia



Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).

Brain Drain: I've had a lot of conversations about Mirror's Edge, pretty much every single one expressing a modest, lukewarm liking for the game. Not a lot of real, passionate love out there. What gives? This is not my Killer 7; this game is great people!

Game of the Month: Gears of War 2



Greg Orlando
SENIOR EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Here's the way of it: a game can be fun, but not good, and good, but not fun. The two really are mutually exclusive; if it wasn't the case, Mutant League Football would score a 12 out of 10 and Silent Hill 2 would score a 4 out of 14. Thank god Play eliminated its scores. Also, Greg is counting the days until the installation of Reviewatron 4125, which will finally be able to suggest that fans of the genre should, in fact, like a particular game while all others should try before they buy—in 10 different languages! **Brain Drain:** When rock star George Michael suggested "all we have to do now, is take these lies and make them true somehow" was he being metaphorical or oxymoronic? Also, Greg can't come out and play right now, as he's on a leave of absence. From his brain!

Game of the Month: Fallout 3



Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me, as it can crucially impede or compliment the flow of ideas that a game is attempting to communicate. **Brain Drain:** NCsoft is pulling the plug on Tabula Rasa. A shame, but not surprising after it sold 61k copies while the competition sells millions. Another MMO released at the time, Hellgate, is also scheduled for termination. Just more collateral damage from WoW, or old school designers (Richard Garriott and Bill Roper, respectively) cracking under big publisher pressure?

Game of the Month: Left 4 Dead



Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe videogames can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game. **Brain Drain:** Reviews for The Last Remnant in the popular press disturb me. 5s and 6s from the same crowd that gave Eternal Sonata 8s and 9s? Really? Such massive misjudgments make me believe US journalists no longer "get" JRPGs (for the record, TLR is great; ES isn't). These are the folks that claim the genre is obsolete, but I would argue that the problem lies more with their critical standards.

Game of the Month: The Last Remnant



Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good rearing just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end. **Brain Drain:** This massive cluster-f of year-end holiday releases is breaking my heart, as interesting new IPs are being buried by a flood of franchise hits. Why would EA launch three new IPs in four weeks during the busiest time of year? Everyone would have bought Mirror's Edge had it shipped in August. Why would Square Enix launch Last Remnant while everyone's playing Fable 2 and Fallout 3? With an extra month or two of polishing and perhaps a demo, it could have been big news in March.

Game of the Month: Fable 2

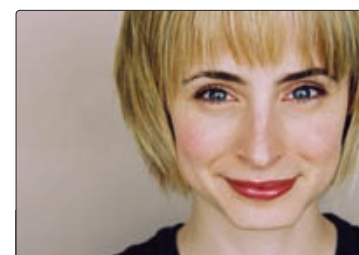


Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.

Brain Drain: It's actually kind of ridiculous how much I love the DS, and how awesome it is; it seriously feels like I'm back in the days of the NES, when games were simple yet full of wonder and amazement. Seriously, though, Nintendo: push the hell out of the DS Ware store on the DSi, and get people to go crazy with cool apps like on the iPhone.

Game of the Month: Retro Game Challenge



Heather Anne Campbell
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.

Brain Drain: I can't be the only one who wants a Street Fighter III re-release for Live and PSN. I can't be. How much time would it take to re-program that game with SSFIITHDR's online engine? Give it a month. You guys don't need to update the graphics or anything. Just let me play Street Fighter III: Third Strike on Live. C'mon. I mean, I'm not begging you. But I could. Alright, now I'm begging. Please, Capcom. Please.

Game of the Month: New Live Dashboard

PRINCE OF PERSIA

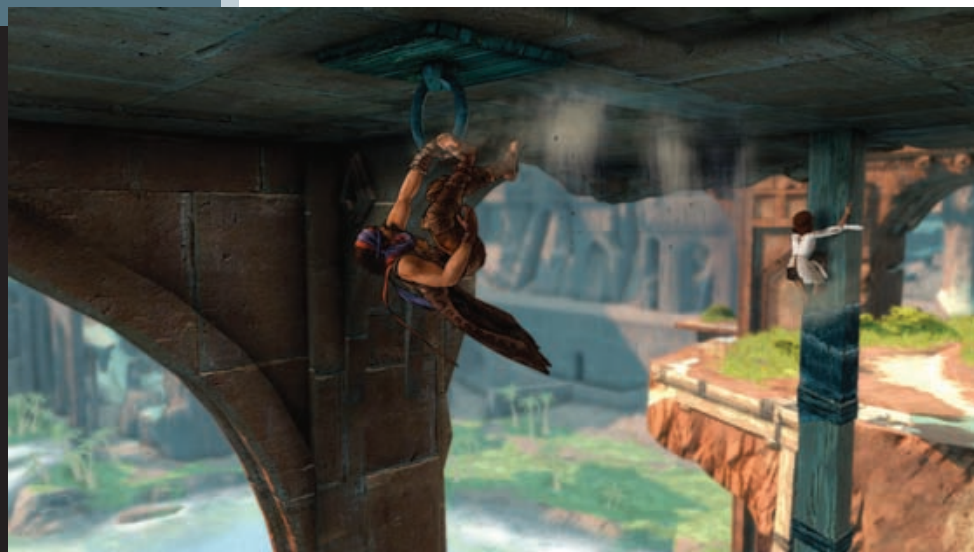
Let the healing begin

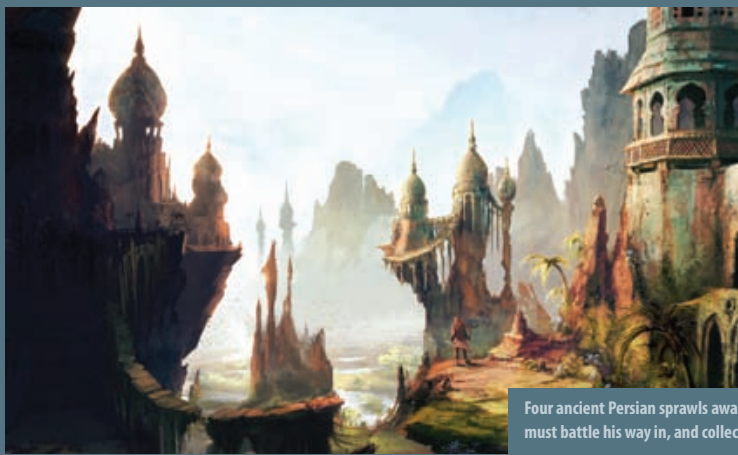
words Dave Halverson

The Prince of Persia series got its first major overhaul in 2003 after Ubisoft pulled it from the flames of a dismal 3D debut and threw the jump-or-die-a-spiky-death framework out the window in favor of a very special do-over dagger that removed the games legendary difficulty once and for all. The Sands of Time also set a new benchmark in artistry and cinematography and made the prince look like a friggin' prince instead of Hodji from Johnny Quest. For series reboot number two, Ubisoft Montreal ditched the dagger along with dying altogether and built their latest oasis on a modified version of the Anvil engine used for Assassins Creed, although the two games couldn't be any farther apart.

Having seen the new Prince of Persia through to its conclusion, my take on it may seem to contradict much of what you've heard or read otherwise, but I

cannot tell a lie; I don't think I've ever been so rapt and ultimately moved by a video game, which considering the sum of its parts has even me baffled. The idea of an open-world game where the only characters aside from a prehensile hero/heroine combination are the resident evil and a couple of bit-players sounds downright ridiculous, but this isn't your ordinary studio, and this definitely isn't your ordinary video game. Our fresh Prince's seventh-generation adventure begins as he emerges from a sandstorm searching for his beloved Farah (no, not that one—she's his donkey) but finds a beautiful princess named Elika in distress instead. And who can blame her, considering her father has just unleashed Ahriman the God of Darkness into the four corners of the kingdom, enveloping each region with seething tar-like liquid corruption and its evil proprietors, while imbuing Elika with strange magical powers capable of both healing the land and playing platform fairy to the prince, returning him to level ground if ever he should fall? Sounds a lot like the old dagger rewind cheat with a beautiful princess thrown in for good measure, yes? That's what I thought too, even as I began playing (between oohs and ahhs) until I discovered the game within the game. Elika's not so much a crutch as she is a partner in every facet of the gameplay, trailing the prince's every move as they negotiate each region's perilous cliffs caves and valleys like nimble acrobats, moving and animating like nothing you've ever seen in a video game. The way they co-mingle, laughing and exchanging repartee as they position themselves on swinging and climbing apparatus, or cling together when the prince reaches out and flips her onto his back or catches her from a fall is so perfect and fluid it's almost hard to believe that you're controlling it. They're an equally majestic pair in the game's battles; spectacles of gorgeous animation and light as they take on sporadic eruptions of the pervasive dark matter that morph into luminous black demons, the game's lone nemesis' along with five of the most memorable and antagonistic supporting creatures you'll ever face in battle. Alone the prince is an agile,





Four ancient Persian sprawls await Elika's healing touch. The Prince must battle his way in, and collect Light Seeds on the way out.



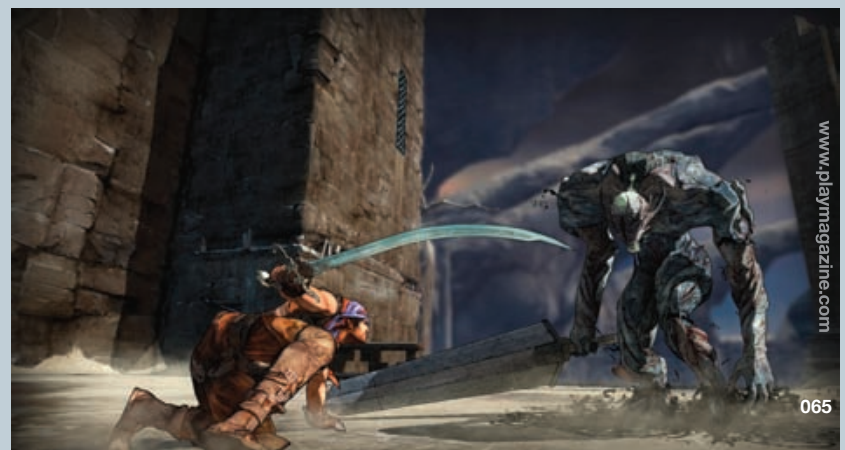
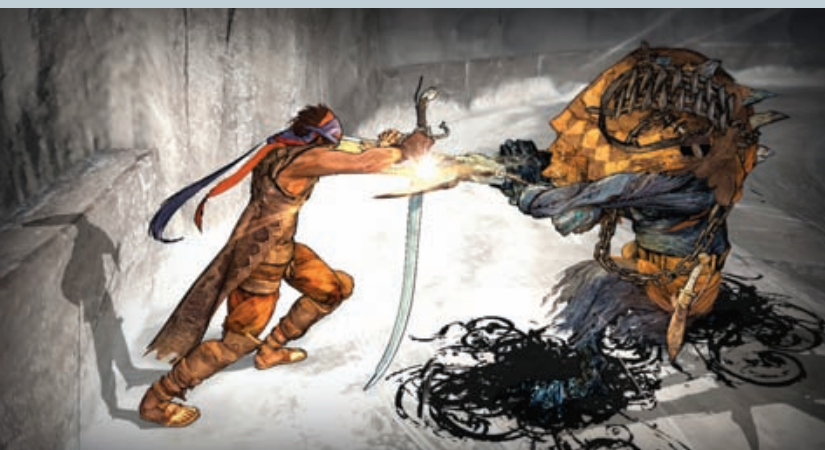
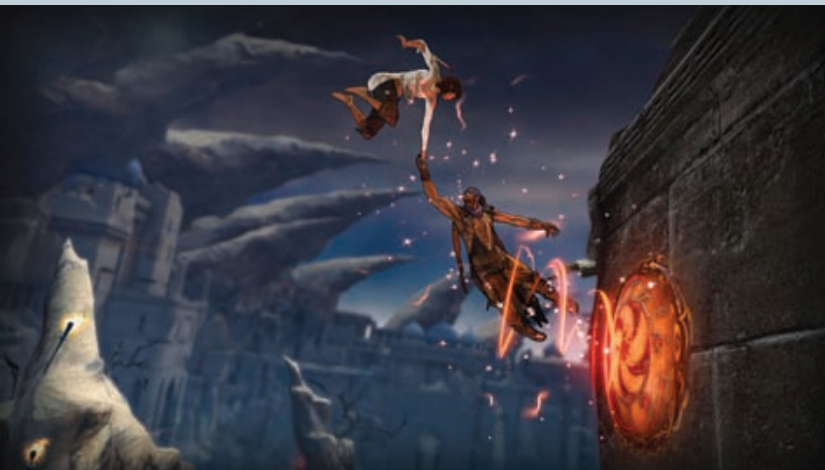
highly skilled swordsman but pitted against Ahrimans tougher denizens, Elika's magic is essential. Once you've mastered the prince's three prong attack lesser enemies can often be dispatched with a single strike, but chaining his simple combos together with Elika's magical attacks (along with quick reflexes for key quick time maneuvers) is paramount in fending off characters like the Alchemist or the Hunter.

In many ways Elika's as vital as the prince, short of being playable. She's a magic compass for one thing, casting a streaking orb in the direction of your waypoint and each region can only be fully explored and its guardian expelled after she obtains the power to utilize its network of colored seals by passing through wraithlike iridescent blue training rituals at the foot of the Tree of Life temple prison where Ahriman was held captive. Orange sends the pair flying through the sky, green initiates a gravity defying speed dash, yellow launches them into Peter Pan like flying sequences and blue sends out an electric field that jettisons them towards the next seal. You begin with orange, a simple non-controlled flight path (although the Prince must

guide them to the next seal after they land) but by game's end you'll be navigating long complex routines linking all four colors. How you go about healing the kingdom is entirely up to you, based on the order in which you select Elika's powers. On the whole, the game is repetitious by design: An exercise in minimal effort with maximum results, building on a handful of basic non-evolving fundamentals until you feel like a gaming god. The focus is on rhythmic button presses chaining together fluid consecutive moves based on timing and quick reactions over complex controls. Each land consists of four regions dripping with corruption linked by a network of arteries and a final doorway leading to a climactic final (you hope) battle. After Elika heals each region, peeling away the darkness in an Okami-like wave of coloration, the gameplay shifts from traversal and battles to collecting, gathering enough Light Seeds to earn her next power. The rewind in the Sands of Time structure was set along a predetermined path, but in an open-world game where the closer you look the more paths you find, it's like a license to experiment. Since there's no loading or interruption to

gameplay should you fail, leaps of faith become a part of the process. No matter how impossible something looks, if there's a Light Seed to be collected there's a way to reach it, and if you really care about that beautiful princess who's been there for you whenever you need her, you'll find it. Wall-running and bounding, grappling and swinging...all the usual suspects are here along with some new gravity defying maneuvers that never cease to amaze. Double jumping is so five minutes ago now that we can have Elika whip us forward in midair. Navigating vertical descents with

"...Prince of Persia is one of the most visually stunning games ever created alongside Assassin's Creed."



"The writers cue up just enough dialogue between events and areas to draw us in but also keep us guessing 'til the end."

the prince's gauntlet is cool too, but grabbing a ring on decent and scurrying across the ceiling, I didn't expect that. Everything the prince and Elika do looks amazing—even leaping between columns the prince will automatically flip himself around to the opposite side and lines up for the next as Elika grabs hold. Every aspect of the gameplay is precise and just pure fun. The ratio between battles, solving environmental puzzles, and platforming is about even. All I know is that I couldn't get enough of any of them the first time through.

If you like a great story the real magic happens when Elika and the prince are at rest or any place you decide they should have a conversation. I'm sure you've heard by now that the prince is an arrogant, wise-cracking, walking cliché spouting typical video game quips ad nauseam, because he is...only this time, it's by design. Penning a screenplay that happens to take place in a video game, the writers have given their leading man a flawed persona for good reason. What begins as typical bad-boy meets good-girl banter runs much deeper where the script ends and the prince and Elika's relationship begins. Beyond their embedded verbal exchanges open conversation from idle chatter (loaded with the prince's pretentious responses) to the events unfolding around them are a button press away, as I discovered reading a loading screen message a few

hours into the game. The amount of character and story development left to the player's discretion is surprising although I think I understand the reasoning behind it. Your average action game junkie could probably care less about how they're getting on, but for those of us who go all-in the pay-off is substantial. Without giving too much away, the whole harem-diving playboy ruse is the prince's way of coping with a tragic past. The writers cue up just enough dialogue between events and areas (you know the conversation is over as soon as a stock line turns up) to draw us in but also keep us guessing 'til the end, which left me in a state no video game and few films have. I have so many questions, all of which will hopefully be answered by the time the issue streets.

It goes without saying that Prince of Persia is one of the most visually stunning games ever created, alongside Assassins Creed. For a game to have such wondrous graphics and deliver an equivalent level of story and gameplay is rare indeed, although it's become the hallmark of Ubisoft's Montreal operation.

As much as I love shiny normal mapping and picture perfect environments, the "illustrative" art style they've christened this game with is the best I've seen, incorporating the shiny etched metal of bump-mapping along with the clean lines of cell shading, only without all the artificial looking caveats. Stone

and dirt formations have natural-looking rough, uneven surfaces; water glistens and sprays; wood looks rugged and natural; and creature, character, and wardrobe design have simply reached a new highpoint. We've all seen cloth effects, which look like cloth "effects," but you've never seen silk that looks and acts like silk. You can see the wind flowing through Elika's clothing, causing the entire garment to lift and flutter with no visible creasing or blending of any kind and the detail in the prince's garb is utterly stupefying. Skin, hair and eyes...everything looks so organic, like a fusion of real-life and watercolors contrasted by superb lighting, fire, and an effect or two you'll see here for the first time. This is how games were meant to evolve—becoming more and more beautiful, genuine, and accessible. Drink it in a few times and be sure to stop and admire the falling leaves and butterflies...it'll be two years by my calculations until we see anything like it again.

parting shot

The absolute pinnacle of action and adventure from one of the best studios working today, Prince of Persia is in a class by itself. I didn't think it was possible to "miss" a virtual character, or achieve this level of sophistication across the boards and sustain it for such a long stretch of time. I can't wait to find out what happens next.



SUPER STREET FIGHTER II

TURBO HD REMIX

words Heather Anne Campbell

Hyper Time Deluxe Resistance Ultra Clocked Zero

"What this means is, almost twenty years later, my living room has finally caught up to the 7-11 where I used to play Street Fighter as a kid."

As I write this review, my hands are shaking. I am nauseous, frustrated, and enraged. It's not that Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix is a bad game or anything; it's that the Xbox Controller is not designed for versus fighters. There is no hope for me of truly giving in to this game because playing with a control pad is not the Street Fighter way. Sure, we've all become accustomed to using d-pads and face/shoulder button combinations, but this game was crafted for a joystick with six clearly aligned, finger sized buttons. The motions we use for Dragon Punches and Fireballs are arm gestures, not thumb presses.

Capcom, you should have released this game when the MadCatz controller was available. Hunting down an import stick to play Street Fighter II is going to be the bane of my month.

Anyway, the big and important surprise here is that **online works very well**. After the debacle that was Street Fighter Anniversary Collection, I had more than my share of doubts. I raised an eyebrow every time Capcom assured me, "It'll work." But here I am, playing Street Fighter II online! And it's fun!! There's very little lag, usually, because of some kind of predictive (and adjustable) input system that Remix is employing. When there is lag, the game is suddenly confusing; your character is in the middle of a throw when suddenly you're being hit by a fireball and you're across the screen. Happily, this rarely happens.

What this means is, almost twenty years later,



my living room has finally caught up to the 7-11 where I used to play Street Fighter as a kid. I can play endless rounds of Street Fighter II. If this were Street Fighter III, I would never leave my couch. If this were Third Strike, I'd be discovered years from now, covered in newspaper and grease, two hundred pounds heavier, with a beard.

What HD's quality also implies is that Street Fighter IV will be frothingly awesome, since Capcom is using the online system they've developed here as the framework behind IV.

This game is like a very special collector's box set of a great record that came out two decades ago. A limited edition print with higher fidelity. If gaming has already had true classics, then Street Fighter II is one of our best albums. Everything you could want from Street Fighter II is here: dip switch settings, variable online toggles, even a mode with hitboxes for cleaning up your play. There's a classic setting, and a remixed setting for re-



balanced, corrected combat. Online modes include Tournament, Ranking, Custom, Quick Match . . . any type of VS play that you could dream up. Sure, getting thrown back to the main menu when you're finished with ranked matches is annoying, but I'm sure someone will fix that with a patch. Additionally, as of this writing, the ranking scores are busted, but it's such an obvious error that I'm guessing it will be changed within the week.

The game is so hardcore that it eclipses my enthusiasm for the old brawler—I can't even imagine what else anyone might want from Street Fighter II. Other than a joystick.

The UDON team has done their best to make the game an HD experience, but as well-intended as the redesigns are, they sometimes come off like a Flash game. The art is a matter of taste; some people will love it, others will hate it. Overall, the game appears as it does in our memories, the characters fleshed out with the details the old sprites implied. Regrettably, some characters have a unfinished sketch quality to their outlines: Chun-Li, for example, has a penciled roguishness in her frame that gets a little ugly in certain color combinations. If players so desire, they can fight with original graphics for the characters . . . but the backgrounds will remain in sharp HD. So, flatly put, it's ugly.

The music, by OverClocked Remix, is shockingly terrible. After a few hours, I set the music back to the original score . . . and will never return it to the default setting. This is the second biggest surprise of the game, after the quality of the online play. I can't guess why the soundtrack to HD remix is so bad.

I wish I could play the game in a sharp, sprite-based, completely original mode, but that's just me. Regardless, I am getting up from my computer to fight some more, right now. I'll be screaming at the controller fifteen seconds after that.

February can't come fast enough.

parting shot



This is Street Fighter II, finally functional online. Hardcore and thorough, I can't imagine what other editions we could need after this. Character art is going to be your bag or it won't; I wish it weren't so Westernized. Switch the music as soon as you can.





Left 4 Dead

The long-awaited sequel to Left for Dead, Left 2 Die, and 3 Left 3 Dead: Tokyo Drift

words Casey Lee



Very sexy.

“...the overrun cities, shattered airports and remote farms where you fight for survival feel vast and open-ended...”

At this point, I'll be disappointed if there isn't a full-scale zombie invasion during our lifetimes. Between the Resident Evils and the Dead Risings and the Houses of the Dead, I figure your average young man of gaming age spends 100 hours a year fighting off simulated zombie assaults, and with Left 4 Dead now on store shelves, that number could easily double. It's safe to say that America's zombie-invasion preparedness level is at an all-time high.

While previous games have focused on teaching us how to dismember zombies and/or photograph them in dramatic poses, Left 4 Dead stresses the importance of zombie-survival teamwork. The four heroes of Left 4 Dead can be controlled by any combination of split-screen housemates, online friends and strangers, and reasonably intelligent computer-controlled bots. Those who choose to play the troubled maverick or are too shy to plug in a headset will be dead within minutes, as nearly every zombie attack turns into some sort of team-building exercise. Being taken down by a hunter or smoker? Better get a friend to kill the offending zombie or you're dead. Spotted a witch? Better get your team to shut off their flashlights and ease their hands off the triggers or they'll be in a world of hurt. Been barfed on by a Boomer? Better coordinate how exactly you'll lead the oncoming horde of vomit-seeking zombies into your allies' shotgun blasts, or someone's getting mauled. As countless co-op games have taught us, almost any mechanic that forces players to directly interact with each other is a hit, because being a hero to a real person is infinitely more satisfying than saving some soulless NPC. And Left 4 Dead is packed with hero

moments, where half your battered, harried, terrified team is running for the ship that will take them to safety, but you charge off instead in the other direction, into a sea of zombies, to revive a fallen comrade. Mind you, none of this is particularly original—you've faced similar situations in *Gears of War* and *Call of Duty*, but the appeal of zombie killing makes *Left 4 Dead* stand out amongst the many games that employ a military aesthetic. And the element of exploration provides another novel twist: the overrun cities, shattered airports and remote farms where you fight for survival feel vast and open-ended, with plenty of buildings to search for health packs and ammo. But it's the constant and familiar heroics of co-op gaming that make *Left 4 Dead* such an intense and rewarding experience.

If only it was a slightly fuller one. *Left 4 Dead* is short enough that you could easily beat it in a day, and if you



Reach out and touch someone.



"...*Left 4 Dead* stresses the importance of zombie-survival teamwork."

have a good group fighting by your side then you almost certainly *will*, because it's just that addictive. I don't mind the lack of length, but I do mind the lack of *content*. The game has only six different enemies, all of which appear in every campaign, as does every weapon and each of the game's limited number of gimmicks (such as car alarms that attract zombies). Each of the four campaigns' final chapters are basically identical—you hold a position against an endless zombie horde for X minutes while you wait for help to arrive—the developers really couldn't come up with *any other* ideas for a climactic final battle? It's true that the open nature of the levels and random enemy placements make the game fun to replay for a while, and a versus campaign where two teams alternate between playing as the heroes and the zombies adds a bit of novelty. But the lack of variety amongst the campaigns and the inability to unlock anything beyond achievements or build your character in any way restricts *Left 4 Dead* to being the sort of game you and your friends play nightly for a week and then abandon, as opposed to becoming a long-term obsession.

I respect the developers' decision to make a purely multiplayer-focused game rather than split their resources with a half-hearted single-player campaign. (You can play through the multiplayer campaign solo with computer-controlled bots, but without any way of communicating with your teammates, it isn't much fun). But the limited length and lack of variety in the multiplayer campaign does leave it feeling more like the best mode from a larger game than a full \$60 experience. Virtually all of the things that make *Left 4 Dead* great, minus the sense of exploration, are present in the 5-player Horde mode of *Gears of War 2*, a game that comes packed with a variety of other compelling competitive modes and a great single-player/co-op campaign as well. Valve has made vague promises about expanding *Left 4 Dead* in the future, but until we know the specifics of the content and the pricing, they don't get any credit for that.

Last year Valve wowed us with the sheer volume of content in the Orange Box, but this year's Green Box feels like barely half of a game. At least it's half of a really good one.

parting shot



Left 4 Dead's high-energy thrills rank among the best co-op experiences available on Xbox Live. But they aren't terribly different from the kind you could get in other games like *Gears of War 2*, which offer significantly more content for your money.

Destroy All Humans' Crypto and his crotchety old hologram of a Commander in Chief Orthopox are about as close to a Mad Magazine style spoof-o-rama (with some bite) as gaming franchises get. Anal probes, head-popping psychokinesis, disintegration rays... Crypto will do whatever it takes to keep their DNA harvesting mission secret for as long as we hairless apes keep coming back for more. The follow-up to Big Willy Unleashed, in which Orthopox started a fast food chain (Big Willy's) to cash in on all the corpses Crypto was leaving around by feeding them to the public, Path of the Furon gets underway in the Vegas send-up city of Los Paradiso, circa sometime in the 70s where Crypto has finally realized his dream and opened a big-time casino called The Space Dust. But all is far from well; the Molinari crime family is on to him and has arranged to have him whacked, so, missions, odd jobs, and challenges, here we come.

Sandblast holds fast to a familiar open-world structure in Path of the Furon, and although it doesn't seem to be their forte, they certainly make the best of it. Their biggest hurdle appears to be tech. For a dedicated 360/PS3-developed title (although the PS3 version has been cancelled) it's definitely on the bare bones side. I don't mind the somewhat basic architecture or the washed-out look of the normal-mapping, but the crude nature of the models and lack of variety in the pedestrian traffic is a hard pill to swallow. There are so few character-types that at any given time there might be six (in a crowd of 20 or more) in view, so bunches of the exact same model are rampant. They change from site to site (although some are carried over) and they do improve



Destroy All Humans: Path of the Furon

Very illegal alien

words Dave Halverson



slightly—Sunnywood for instance has much better people than Las Paradiso—but overall, more variety and better design would have made a significant difference. At close proximity the city around Crypto looks fine: automobiles have a nice shine, water looks wet, and the textures finally begin to pop when you hit Sunnywood. Sandblast does a nice job on the long shots too by gradually blurring into the horizon line.

Before leaving Las Paradiso for Sunnywood California on the five site trek you'll have to re-anal probe a UFO abductee, body snatch the Don of the Molinari's, hijack Southern rocker Leg Tallman to break up Sammy & Faire (aka Sunny and Cher) and ripped off enough of the militaries toxic waste to gas up the saucer to get out of town, as soon as you erase it. What I like most about Path of the Furon (and where Sandblast seems to feel right at home) is its political incorrectness. It's nice to play a game that's not afraid of its own shadow. Path of the Furon is a dark comedy that parodies 70s culture with a tendency to veer into potty humor and other touchy places that it's not afraid to slap around. Arriving in Sunnywood, J. Grant Albrecht (who's been playing Crypto as Jack Nicholson since the beginning) finally gets to jack into the real

"What I like most about Path of the Furon is its political incorrectness. It's nice to play a game that's not afraid of its own shadow."

thing, before heading out to infiltrate Dr. C. Curt Calvin's Church of Alientology. Next up? The movie business of course, and so it goes with a decidedly dark underbelly. Another high-point is the emphasis on flying missions in Crypto's new ride. Orthopox has even opened up a shop (Pox-Mart) to upgrade it. The Death Ray is standard equipment along with a cloaking device and the ability to suck up humans like a giant Roomba, or vehicles to drain for ammo and repairs. Multiple target-locking Seeker Drones come next, perfect for downing attack choppers, followed by the Plasma Cannon, Tornadotron and the always handy Quantum Deconstructor. As for Crypto; he's armed to the teeth. The Zap-O-Matic, Disintegrator Ray, Black Hole Gun, and Anal Probe launcher can all be upgraded, and heavy carnage comes by way of the Venus People Trap, Ion Detonator, Dislocator, and Superballer (names kinda say it all). He's got himself an alien Kung-Fu Master too, along with a Meditation Chamber where he can choose to strengthen the path of the mind, body, space or time. So the more you Body snatch, Cortex scan, or use PK the more powerful they become, which loosely translated means more fun and creative ways then ever to mess with mankind, and this time out, cyborgs! Crypto and Pox have stirred the pot so much that now even the aliens wanna whack 'em.

parting shot

Path of Furon has its share of physics bugs and collision miscues and the tech is only okay, but if you're looking for a lengthy open-world mission-based spoof starring a raucous alien (and who isn't?) it's the best number on the bathroom wall. The 70s send-up is pitch perfect and causing a city-wide state of panic has never been quite so fun, or funny.





Naruto The Broken Bond

A little bent, but not broken.

words Heather Anne Campbell



A little more than a year ago, I went to Ubisoft Montreal to do a feature on *Naruto: Rise of a Ninja*. The team on that game was not just talented, they were anime enthusiasts—making a game because they loved the license. *Rise of a Ninja* was not the greatest game ever made, but it delivered a unique *Naruto* experience unlike anything else on the market for the VIZ juggernaut. A free-roaming Konoha city center. Delightful tree-hopping action sequences. A surprisingly deep fighting engine. What's more, the game featured a Japanese voice track . . . meaning that for *Naruto* purists, it was the closest thing to living in the country of the leaf that we'd ever get, apart from taking hallucinogens and duct-taping our foreheads to the television during episodes of *Shippuden*.

I liked *Rise of a Ninja* enough to finish it. I was disappointed that I didn't get to review the game when it came out, but . . . hey, there are plenty of other *Naruto* games, right? (Sigh.)

So, here I am, getting a chance to review the sequel to *Rise of a Ninja*. I should be ecstatic. But I can think is, "Man, I wish I were reviewing that *first* game."

That's not to say *Broken Bond* sucks. In fact, the sequel gets a few things better. First off, let me say that the tree-hopping stuff is so much fun, and so gorgeous to behold, that it should be its own game. Ubisoft improved the sequences by making them largely first-person, save for small sections where the camera pulls out to a close third-person, when *Naruto* and friends are dashing across long branches or pools of water.

Another improvement on the original is the inclusion of three-man ninja teams. Players can switch between Konoha's finest and deploy their unique skills on the plains of adventure or, at least wherever a brightly colored icon suggests they should. For example, when a switch needs to be pulled to deactivate a trap, players toss control over to Shikamaru, and use his shadow jutsu to navigate a maze that stands between the team and their goal.



Ink slashes make everything more dramatic.



"First off, let me say that the tree-hopping stuff is so much fun, and so gorgeous to behold, that it should be its own game."

This game is not designed for new fans of the *Naruto* world, nor the uninitiated. Covering episodes 81-135, the game picks up in the middle of the story, and never attempts to explain what the hell is going on. As a long time *Naruto* fan, I *greatly* appreciate this, but I can understand why it would limit the title's audience. Another thing I applaud is the decision to grant *Naruto* almost all of his abilities from the end of *Rise of a Ninja*. I don't want to spend eight hours relearning Shadow Clone Jutsu, or the ability to run really fast, and the game gives these back to the player nearly immediately. Thank you, Ubisoft, thank you. Running *fast* and *double-jumping* were very simple joys in the first game, and I dreaded waiting for them to be unlocked again.

Now, what does the game get worse? The

animation in cut-scenes seems stiffer, though it may be my imagination. Also, the fetch quests start almost before the game's title screen, and I don't want to find another block of wood for a boat, nor do I want to run around the forest to get coins anymore. If these coins are so valuable, why are people leaving them lying around in the forest? How come no one else has picked them up? They are GIGANTIC and GLOWING. To put it another way, if I were saving a piece of wood in a field, and there was a coin the size of my torso rotating next to me, I might drop my saw and bring it to town to see what it was worth. Why are people hiding these coins in big blue barrels? There's a lot of quality in *The Broken Bond*, but gamey garbage like this drags it into the gutter. The producers should learn that just jumping across rooftops is fun. I don't need a reason to do it, and even if I did, it doesn't have to be enormous floating currency.

parting shot



A longer story mode, covering the most dramatic arc of the anime, means this game has got some punch. Improvements to the tree-hopping sequences make up for stiffer dialogue scenes. But to hell with fetch quests. I'd rather look through my own pockets for hidden coins.

Mortal Kombat VS. DC Universe

DC saves the day for MK

words Matt Cabral



For many, the ability to kick ass as the brooding Dark Knight will be enough to bring them back to the Mortal Kombat franchise. In fact, anyone who watched Christian Bale snarl behind the bat cowl this summer—even those that wouldn't know an MK fatality if someone handed them their spine—might be tempted to get their Bat on in this bizarre mash-up of DC superheroes and Mortal Kombat all-stars. Surprisingly, the title should succeed in pleasing both the MK and DC camps, as it packs the most satisfying Kombat combat since the fighter's fatality-fueled heyday, while still respecting the iconic lore of its comic book combatants.

Those concerned their favorite gore-tastic fighter has gone soft with an uncharacteristic T rating can rest assured—MK is still packed with plenty of way-over-the-top, bone crunching violence. Sure, the blood orgies and stomach-churning fatalities have been toned down a bit, but many of the new moves—especially those of DC's cape and cowl crew—are quite impressive, and mostly make up for the scaled back brutality. And, while MK's dirty fighters might seem a bit tamer, DC's lineup conversely comes off more brutal than you've ever seen them—this game even makes The Flash look like a badass.

All the classic characters' signature special

"It's a match made in geek heaven for fans of both universes..."

moves (plus multiple variations on them) are present, so you can count on fiery skills and chilly tricks from Shang Tsung and Sub-Zero, respectively. However, it's the DC character's creative arsenal that really freshens up the fight. Whether you're unleashing a flurry of batarangs as the caped crusader, alternately freezing and frying an opponent with Supe's breath and vision, or even whipping the bejezus out of a baddie just before straddling them about the waist, as Catwoman, the spandex-clad cast unquestionably gives the franchise a much-needed jolt. And hell, who wouldn't want to put MK's baddies in their place as the clown prince of darkness; digging into the Joker's bag of underhanded tricks and booby traps offers some of the game's coolest moments.

MK vs. DCU's biggest challenge is actually trying to make sense of this undeniably ridiculous meeting of magic, biceps, capes and utility belts; just because it's cool pitting these classic fighters against

iconic superheroes doesn't mean it makes any sense. Under the near-impossible circumstances, the writers do a decent job of explaining why these universes have collided, but the story is still the title's weakest link. The game's also a little short on modes and bonus content, compared to previous entries. Minor gripes aside though, this one's a winner for all but the most hardcore MK purists who simply can't accept the radical turn their favorite fighter has taken. It's a match made in geek heaven for fans of both universes, and the comic book collecting set will find it does justice to their paneled page icons better than most dedicated superhero games.

parting shot

Hardcore MK fans might need more convincing, but everyone else will likely overlook the silly character clashes in favor of the satisfying combat, complemented by the series' best-ever selection of special moves.



Sonya, meet Lex.
Lex, Sonya.





The Maw

You really are what you eat

words Dave Halverson



A few weeks before the Xbox 360 launch during our private orientation at the Microsoft Campus, I remember nearly falling asleep as they went on about XBLA and words like “community” and “connectivity.” Similar buzzwords and catch phrases in the past were always red herrings, and these sounded like the most far-fetched yet. Why would anyone want to play old or untried downloadable games on a console built for shiny new normal-mapped HD games? I’ll tell you why: because as development becomes more expensive and consumer games more restricted, many of the fresh ideas out there simply can’t get funded. Even if they could, the major chains would bury a game like *The Maw* somewhere behind blockbuster alley.

The Maw is the kind of purely unexpected game that makes me think anything is possible. It’s hard to believe that it’s Twisted Pixel’s first game. For one thing, it’s super tight. Even when established by industry veterans, first efforts from new teams seldom look or play so well, let alone inexpensive downloads. It’s also visually striking—full of rich colors, clean lines, exceptional

“[*The Maw* is] visually striking—full of rich colors, clean lines, exceptional character designs and most of all, expression.”



character designs and most of all, expression. We forget sometimes how wonderful expression can be. So many of today’s mass consumer games are fixated on online capabilities, length, and ease of play, that they forget about essentials like expression and a true sense of wonder. *The Maw* emphasizes these aspects, as their peculiar little alien Frank makes a methodical break for it. Accompanying him is *The Maw*, a cute little blob with cute little razor sharp teeth that will soon grow to an enormous blob with an insatiable appetite and very large

razor sharp teeth—and a tongue to match.

The essence of the gameplay is pure cause-and-effect puzzle action, tossing strange alien creatures into *The Maw*’s mouth to make him grow and/or absorb their DNA and take on their characteristics. For Frank’s part, he’s much more than the guy with the leash. He can latch onto gelatinous flying Bulbouses carrying exploding balls of pollen; pull creatures out of the ground to slam, spin-throw or toss to *The Maw*; or even dodge bullets, then slam the turrets that fired them. He also does a bit of platforming and shooting, rides *The Maw*, flies *The Maw*, and steers *The Maw* as Twisted Pixel takes us through an array of otherworldly alien mind benders. Strange Dodo bird-like creatures called Loofers (once Frank cooks ‘em a little) turn *The Maw* into a nine-eyed laser shooting pack animal, ingesting yummy Puff-Tors changes him into the world’s hungriest (and slimiest) balloon, and my personal favorite *Maw* food, the Beetull, morphs him into a rampaging giant alien dung beetle. Twisted Pixel has done an extraordinary job taking a simple premise with simple controls and weaving it into an addictive experience. The original interactive soundtrack by composer Winifred Phillips fits the quirky nature of the game like a glove. *The Maw* is over all too soon, taking only a few short hours (that fly by) to complete—but something tells we haven’t seen the last of Frank and *The Maw*.

parting shot



Invention is Xbox aLive and well. *The Maw* is original, ultra-polished and ten tons of gelatinous fun. There’s also a lot of potential here for a bigger game should Twisted Pixel find themselves popular suddenly.



Cheating Death
is one thing...

But mess with his
kid and there will
be hell to pay!

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review

System: DS Developer: Koei Publisher: Koei ESRB: E Available: Now

Pop Cutie! Street Fashion Simulation

Replicating the bizarre world of Japanese fashion to a frightening degree

There's a good chance that you've never heard of Pop Cutie!, or if you have, the idea of running your own fashion store just didn't trip your trigger. Here's the thing: this is a highly addictive game, one which combines an interesting business-building sim with some truly wacked-out Japanese style and humor. Even if you think trying to rule the fashion world might not be your bag, you'll be surprised by the enjoyment to be had not only from struggling to come up with the next big thing, but also watching your customers gobble up the ridiculous outfits the game lets you put together. We're about to enter that time of year when the flood of new titles dwindles to a trickle; if you're looking for something new and unique to play, give Pop Cutie! some consideration. **Eric L. Patterson**



preview

System: DS Developer: Global A Publisher: Atlus ESRB: E Available: February 2009



My World, My Way

Level up! +5 Selfishness!

It was Nick's review in the August '08 edition of play japan where I first learned about The World Revolves Around Me. While I was initially caught by the artwork, it was the premise of the game that cemented my need to play it sooner or later. The classic rules of JRPG roles have been reversed, as now you play the princess, and instead of being the one in need of a hero, you get to be that hero. However, our hero here is a spoiled brat of a girl, out on her journey for no better reason than to show the brave knight who spurned her love just how big of a mistake he made.

I prayed that TWRAM would make it our way, and my prayers have now been answered. Retitled My World, My Way for its North American release, the game is thankfully in the hands of Atlus, a company absolutely up to the task of making sure all of the charm and character presented within is kept intact in the translation process. **Eric L. Patterson**



preview

System: DS Developer: Firebrand Games Publisher: Atlus ESRB: Not Yet Rated Available: March 2009

Trackmania DS

Atlus changes track

Wait, okay, hold on. Atlus, the company best known for their crazy niche games and RPG re-releases, has decided to publish a racing game? Indeed it's true, but this isn't any old game: it's Trackmania DS, the DS racing title based on the cult-classic PC series known for its utterly insane and gravity-defying racing venues. Word is Firebrand Games has done a very impressive job in bringing this series to the DS, and thankfully the spirit of bringing to life your own track creations will be intact via the DS touchscreen. While the beloved online aspect of Trackmania won't be available here, the game will allow up to four-player direct competition, or up to eight people via a "Hotseat" mode. **Eric L. Patterson**



System: PSP Developer: SNK Playmore Publisher: SNK Playmore Multi: 1-2 Player ESRB: Teen Available: Now

review

The King of Fighters Collection

~The Orochi Saga~

The King is dead, long live The King.

There are a few gaming franchises that I hold sacred, and one of them is The King of Fighters. I've owned a copy of every single chapter of the saga on one platform or another, and sometimes (especially in '98) multiple copies on multiple platforms.

So, a collection of the "Orochi saga" days of the KOF series should be a wonderful thing, especially when those five games—KOF '94 through '98—come stuffed onto one UMD disc along with some decent bonus content. Unfortunately, the collection is brought down by a disappointing sense of developer apathy.

The key to any fighting game is the gameplay itself, and thankfully, aside from a few issues here and there, that's mostly intact. What hasn't made the move to the PSP so well is the audio: sound effects and voices often come out noticeably late or not at all, and round start/end notifications routinely get cut off before they're done. The collection is also, for better or worse, a "dump" of the MVS (aka arcade) versions of these KOF titles, meaning what you're getting are bare-bones games lacking some of what we've come to expect from previous home ports. The big catch here is the complete absence of a solo character mode; The King of Fighters has always been about the team-based gameplay, but not having the option of this now-standard selection is unfortunate.

I love you SNK, but for a company that is so dependent on their much-beloved back catalog, it's sad to see how those games are sometimes treated. **Eric L. Patterson**

parting shot

If you really want KOF on the go, this collection will suit your needs; otherwise, you're better off with the console versions.



System: Nintendo DS Developer: Bandai Namco Publisher: XSEED Multi: 1 Player ESRB: Not Yet Rated Available: January 2009

preview

Retro Game Challenge

Proving nostalgia is sometimes right

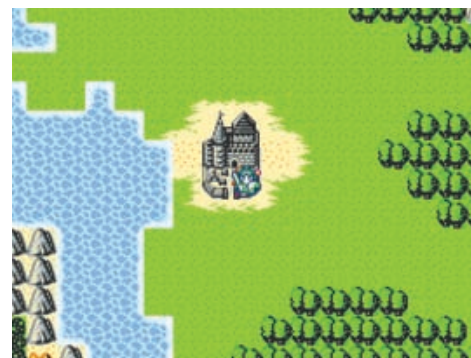
While back, I brought you a quick preview of Retro Game Challenge, the North American version of Game Center CX, an ode in DS cartridge form to the nostalgic era of Famicom gaming brought to us by Japanese comedian (and video game lover) Shinya Arino.

I've now had the chance to spend some time with an English-language build of the game, and am happy to report that not only am I enjoying the heck out of Retro Game Challenge, but the translation process is going great.

In case you aren't familiar with the premise, you (the player) are sent back through time by the present-day "Game Master" Arino, and together with his younger

self, you must successfully complete a series of challenges presented to you across a wide array of classic 8-bit games. Except, these aren't classic games: they're brand new titles created to look and feel like they are, and not only do they absolutely resemble what you could have purchased back in the 80s, but they even include little details like instruction manuals, cheat codes, and replica Famicom cartridge artwork.

Oh, and you have to love what XSEED is doing with the in-game digital magazine GameFan: instead of filling the issues with fake editors, they've gone out and enlisted real staff members from a variety of U.S. gaming media, including two guys named Dave Halverson and Nick Des Barres. Whoever they are. **Eric L. Patterson**



Mirror's Edge

Faith gets physical with PhysX

words Mike Griffin

PC gaming goes through highs and lows year after year, and defying many a doomsayer it continues to persevere. As you've likely noticed, the platform is in the midst of a major resurgence. Powerful and affordable PC hardware is easy to find as the brittle economy spurs discounts. PC developers are now mastering multi-core, yielding optimized game performance and enabling more features through existing hardware. Many large publishers are now re-investing in Windows-based gaming with superior PC ports of their next-gen console hits, like EA/DICE's PhysX-enhanced, blisteringly high-res PC edition of Mirror's Edge, arriving in early '09.

On 360 and PS3, Mirror's Edge wields a robust middleware physics solution that gets the job done. Recognizing that a deeper implementation of physics could further enhance its first-person action opus, DICE has collaborated with Nvidia to deliver superior hardware accelerated effects in the PC version. Joining a number of titles to leverage CUDA, the brilliant software that allows a standard GeForce 8, 9 or GTX series graphics card to accelerate PhysX-based games, Mirror's Edge PC will incorporate several new persistent and interactive physics effects. To find out more about Faith's incredible city-spanning parkour and acrobatic exploits on PC, we spoke to the Producer of Mirror's Edge, DICE's Tom Farrer, and Nvidia's resident PhysX expert, product manager Nadeem Mohammad.

What is PhysX?

PhysX works closely with the game engine to calculate the position and velocities of all objects, using forces from collisions and interactions with players and weapons. These calculations are performed for every frame, for all objects—some of which may not even be visible at the time. In PhysX, physical entities can be rigid bodies, fluid particles, cloth, clothing, articulated joints, springs, wheels, pulley systems, rag dolls, deformable metals, soft bodies, and many others.



Interview

Tom Farrer, Producer DICE
Nadeem Mohammad, Product Manager Nvidia

play: *Mirror's Edge* is a critical and fan hit on console. Players love the enthralling first-person action and combat, strong characters and breathtaking environment design. But so far PC players have been left out. What's the prime directive when it comes to the PC version of *Mirror's Edge*?

Tom: The most obvious thing we've done for the PC audience is the integration of Nvidia's PhysX. It enables us to use tearable simulated cloth to add more interactive depth to the environments and cool volumetric force field simulations—like feeling the force of a helicopter, reactive wind or smoke, for example. We have also been able to add interactive persistent weapon debris, which helps you really feel the power of gunfire as concrete and broken glass bounce all around you. Yet more advantages available to high-end spec users are the highest quality textures, 16X anti-aliasing, super high res support, and of course a solid 60 fps.

Let's use the persistent debris as an example. How does that compare to the way it's handled on console, and what do you think it adds to the experience?

Nadeem: In the non PhysX accelerated versions of the game, including the console versions, the user sees a pre-scripted sequence of shattering glass and debris which rapidly disappear to leave just the broken window or wall. In the enhanced version with Nvidia PhysX, the debris is persistent—meaning it becomes part of the scene and interacts with Faith and the environment. For example, when Faith escapes from an explosion, the debris often follows her as she slides down a roof or jumps to the next building. These additions add to the core game play because it directly affects the overall level of immersion. It really is a different experience!

It makes a huge difference. Players are disappointed when bodies, shrapnel and debris don't react or mysteriously fade away. Let's talk more about the changes to the PC version, like interface and control...

"Users of a GeForce GTX 260 and higher will be able to enjoy almost any resolution with AA, high graphics and PhysX enabled."

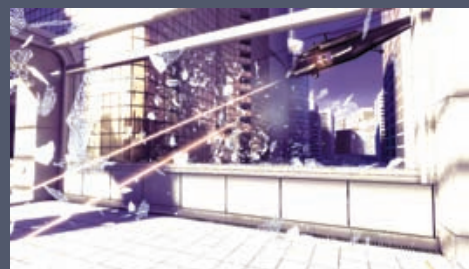
Nadeem Mohammad,
Nvidia

Tom: Well, there are no changes to the HUD since we barely use one, as almost everything in *Mirror's Edge* is communicated through the use of camera animation and full screen FX. We've been developing the game on all three platforms from the beginning of the project, so we've had plenty of time to ensure that mouse/keyboard control works well. The speed and accuracy makes for a very high degree of control over the movement and weaponry. Another neat addition is support for Nvidia GeForce 3D Stereo technology on all GeForce cards that pass our min spec.

For a lot of users, physics acceleration is a whole new frontier to explore on their current graphics cards. I'd like to give our readers a better understanding of the way this horsepower is distributed. Using a GeForce GTX 260 core 216 edition as an example for *Mirror's Edge*, describe what's happening on the card in terms of calculations going to graphics rendering vs. power dedicated to physics processing. Can players maintain high graphics settings while enjoying big accelerated physics?

Tom: I don't have the specific details on that card, so maybe Nadeem can take this...

Nadeem: The GTX 260 is actually an excellent example for this question, as it was one of our key performance targets. In a single card configuration, the graphics and PhysX simulation occur in alternate processing timeslices—but the graphics and PhysX state is maintained in the frame buffer at all times. So graphics use all 216 cores of the GPU some of the time, physics at other times, etc. Users of a GeForce GTX 260 and higher will be able to enjoy virtually any resolution with AA, high



Detailed PhysX-powered glass breaking and fragments.

graphics quality and PhysX enabled.

Tom, now that you've had a taste of physics acceleration in *Mirror's Edge* PC, what kind of future do you see for cards with unified graphics and physics processing and their effect on game design? Perhaps you're thinking of a new PC-only *Battlefield* with PhysX support?

Tom: I think there's huge potential in this kind of technology on PC. It's made a great difference to the game experience and I believe that in the future its usage could be expanded to enrich games even further, especially by building it in to the design of core game mechanics right from the beginning of a project. That way it could lend its power to the experience through every layer of the game. We certainly have a few ideas! As for *Battlefield*, afraid I can't comment...

Nadeem: I can answer that a different way. By planning to leverage PhysX at the early stages of a game, it can change the entire development methodology. For example, all assets used in the game can be made physical at the time they are being designed; it shouldn't matter if they're to be part of the core gameplay or not. This kind of approach increases the flexibility in how a player can interact with the environs, and the AI can be designed to be aware of the possibility of the physical environment changing. Developers are also leveraging the more advanced and exciting PhysX features such as fluids, clothing and soft bodies, things which are tricky to include as options during the final stages of typical game design.

It's one thing to execute big dynamic effects in a rich offline campaigns like *Mirror's Edge*, but it can be tough to migrate these physics to online gameplay due to synchronization and lag. In this age of fast broadband, are the algorithms for full multiplayer PhysX effects finally available?

Nadeem: Actually, many of the PhysX simulations used in *Mirror's Edge* would be able to migrate very well to online games. It's not always essential to synchronize the simulations at each and every timestep, but what is absolutely key is to ensure all game impacting objects are in the same location for all players. Remember that Nvidia PhysX is a cross-platform product, supporting full simulation on CPU and acceleration via GPU. This kind of flexibility gives us many client and server options that will be essential to comprehensive PhysX-enhanced gameplay in online titles going forward.

*Our thanks to DICE and Nvidia for their obliging PhysX insight. PC players will experience the definitive version of *Mirror's Edge* when it arrives early next year.*





Jumpgate Evolution

Arm the photon torpedoes

words Mike Griffin

In a galaxy far, far away (Boulder City, Colorado, actually), we recently had a chance to visit the NetDevil offices and blast some alien scumbags in the developer's forthcoming MMO space shooter, Jumpgate Evolution. To say that NetDevil has bounced back from the termination of its previous effort, *Auto Assault*, would be an understatement. In addition to the 100+ person team hard at work on Jumpgate for publisher Codemasters, an entire wing of NetDevil's vast industrial premises is dedicated to the *Lego Universe* MMO project, including a big warehouse with buckets upon buckets of Lego pieces to fuel the artists' concepts and modeling. It looks like a fun place to work, and NetDevil's efforts thus far in Jumpgate Evolution are very promising, carefully tempered by hindsight.

"...no auto-attacks, action bars, hotkeys, dice rolls, cooldowns, or any of that typical MMO jazz."

Be one with the Skein

You can think of Jumpgate Evolution as the massively multiplayer coming of age for games like *X-Wing*, *Wing Commander* and *Freelancer*. Jumpgate seeks to elevate that formula—the rich lore, strong conflicting factions, vast cosmos and ship trade and combat—to a massively multiplayer scale. Fans of Iain M. Banks' *Culture* science fiction novels may enjoy the premise here, as Jumpgate Evolution shares that series' high theory about the Skein—a latent weave of energy spread across the universe. The most technologically advanced nations have found a way to tap into the Skein to create jumpgates between regions of the galaxy. While this interstellar transport system introduced civilization and friendly trade to many parts of the universe, it also brought old enemies closer to each other's doorstep.

On the precipice of war

Jumpgate sets the stage with three playable nations: The Solrain Commonwealth, once peaceful and benevolent, now a debauched society of mercenaries and smugglers backed by mob-funded mega corporations; Quantar Paths, a spiritual nation of cults and zealots seeking ascension to the stars (The Path) through the Skein; and the Octavian Empire, an aggressive and tyrannical kingdom in the midst of a violent internal struggle to fill the vacant emperor's seat. The other factions worry that when the Octavians finally settle on a new emperor, the unified nation will send its crushing military might to

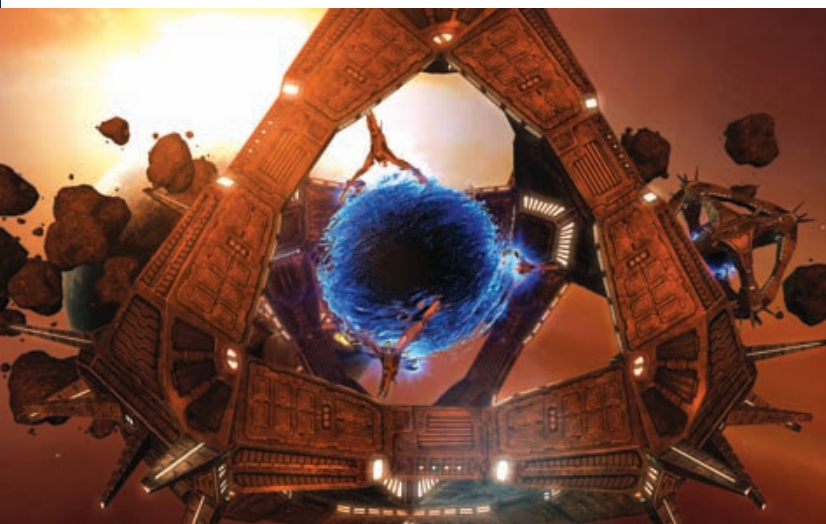
expand and conquer. All three factions have started to behave erratically following a massive Skein-altering phenomena called The Shift. Meanwhile, old foes—the Hyperial Protectorate, Amanath, and Conflux—have re-surfaced in the wake of the incident.

Whether you choose Solrain, Quantar or Octavian, you'll be able to trade and gain reputation with any nation. Jumpgate has a completely player-driven economy, and by mining (explorers will enjoy navigating deep space to find prized asteroids) or assisting with delivery missions, you can have a direct impact on the health of your nation's economy. It's all funnelled through an auction house loaded with parts, primary and secondary weapons, armor and multi-purpose ships.

Jumpgate Evolution boasts a robust PVE mission system, with major sequential events, multi-target combat runs, envoy escorts (pirates be damned), and epic skirmishes. Large-scale PVP competition between nations will be encouraged, as conquered space yields greater resources and more Skein control. The impressive graphics you see in these screenshots are surprisingly optimized in game, allowing truly massive space battles to take place in open and instanced PVP combat zones. How'd they do that?

The beauty of the cosmos

After the somewhat prohibitive system requirements of *Auto Assault*, NetDevil has really gone overboard creating an engine that scales to extremes of low and high spec. Jumpgate Evolution will actually



Find a friend
in the Final
Frontier...

"...win conditions, such as protecting or destroying colossal, heavily armed capital ships."

run well (perhaps not beautifully, but consistently smooth) on motherboard-based laptop video. Played on a solid mid-range PC, you'll experience fantastic performance with all sorts of eye candy enabled, like superb surface lighting on vessels and stations and deeply bump-mapped asteroids. Texture popping is held in check by clever use of noise mapping to retain details, further solidifying the deep space effect. Part of the illusion of this vast, exotic cosmos is conveyed by lovely high-resolution 3D skyboxes inspired by film and TV sci-fi. Each sector of Jumpgate's galactic map is quite large, gauged in tens of thousands of kilometres, and stuff like massive, explorable asteroids, evoking a great sense of galactic scale. Jumpgate also supports triple monitor configurations. We tried it; it's pretty awesome to see that much space around you, your foes zooming across three screens, as if

looking through the large visor of a spaceship.

A dogfighter's dream

Jumpgate Evolution has action combat based on well-aimed shots connecting with targets. It may be classified as a MMO, but there are no auto-attacks, action bars or hotkeys to trigger, nor will you find server dice rolls, cooldowns, or any of that typical MMO jazz. Every weapon and piece of ship armor has a set damage potential and durability in Jumpgate, and all damage is constant and predictable. As for the feel, if you've played a first or third-person shooter you'll be very comfortable with the familiar reticule-based twitch speed aiming.

Ship movement is of course a full 360 degrees, and it's so intuitive that NetDevil opts to skip a tutorial and drop the player right into a dogfight. All ships can strafe, boost and break with considerable accuracy, so you can execute controls like rapidly strafing around a space station while avoiding fire, precisely knocking out individual turrets and shield banks. Several types of peripherals are supported in JGE. NetDevil has matched-up its resident shooter expert on mouse and keyboard versus a flight sim fanatic using a high end flight stick, and scores at the end of the round were

even. It also plays well with an Xbox 360 controller. Since this engine can handle a great deal of action and deliver reliable, instant hit online combat, NetDevil is planning huge encounters in both PVE and PVP (with leaderboards). Battleground-like skirmishes will have specific win conditions, such as protecting or destroying colossal, heavily armed capital ships. Teamwork with fellow nation members will be essential to maintaining focus on your primary goal, balancing the use of faster attack ships and slower, more durable ships. All vessels have an art style unique to the nation of origin, and to further differentiate them in combat, ships from each nation have a distinct color of jet stream.

Taking risks in volatile space

I fear for Jumpgate the way I worry for any game that attempts to break free from the shackles of genre conventions. Then again, with over 150,000 unique beta sign-ups thus far, it looks like a lot of players are anxious to try something new. At this early beta stage, Jumpgate Evolution has demonstrated alluring visuals and sound, responsive arcade controls and satisfying combat, and a potential for great missions and sprawling PVP encounters. There's still much work to be done on the interface, party and nation systems, but this is why betas exist.



Sugar Rush

Rumble in the streets of Bashew City

words Mike Griffin

The name could not be more apropos. During my initial boot up of Sugar Rush, after this really cool character slashes through the developer's logo and the title screen's menacing breakbeat tune begins, I already had a feeling the game was going to deliver sweet rewards. Within minutes my optimism proved accurate: this Smash Bros.-esque 2D brawler exudes charm, precision and energy. It's from the crew that brought you the acclaimed Eets: Chowdown on XBLA, Klei Entertainment, in partnership with Nexon America's new internal development team, Humanature Studio—helmed by Relic founder Alex Garden. Sugar Rush is the first of four titles on the way from this all-star assembly, a big team that selected a seemingly simple multiplayer game design to imbue with high levels of polish, personality and customization.

Read the interview that follows for the full scoop on Creative Director Jeff Agala, a veteran of cable network cartoons and the man responsible for Sugar Rush's outstanding character design and animation. Character design also falls into the user's hands in Sugar Rush. While the meat of the game is frenetic 2D combat in 4 vs. 4 arenas, your online experience in SR is very much MMO-inflected, with a complete character creation system, levels to attain and new

skills to unlock—essentially moves for your 2D fighter. Three basic archetypes are initially selectable: Brawler, a close-quarters melee brute; Ninja, all about speed and precise attacks; and Morph, who can change into different forms, like a rock monster.

The customization potential is impressive, thanks to an ever-growing catalog of Shop upgrades for your head, chest, legs, hands, feet, weaponry, and accessories. We're talking stuff like bunny ears, football helmet, pilot cap, hockey mask, medieval breastplate, wet suit, tuxedo, super hero shirt, and devil costume, with weapons like a crowbar, wand, guitar, butcher knife, battle axe, and for good measure, a frying pan, giant carrot, and No Parking signpost. You can also invest in outfit sets, like Boxer, Karate Master, and Serial Killer-themed kits. And this is a small serving from a closed beta. Expect a constant stream of new character gear when Sugar Rush launches in early 2009. You can even collect dance routines to taunt and amuse your foes.

To reach those levels, unlock new skills and load up on gear, you'll have to fight. That's what people do in Bashew City, ever since the coveted energy source known as "Spark" became such a rare commodity in this world. After a training session in the Brojo, you'll



"...this Smash Bros.-esque 2D brawler exudes charm, precision and energy."



After the early levels, as players rake in some Bash Cash for Shop upgrades, you'll find that no two characters look alike.



partake in Robot Rumble (4 players vs. CPU androids), Team Sparkmatch (4-on-4), and Free For All modes in various urban and industrial locations across Bashew, each one loaded with randomly spawned power-ups like the flame thrower, magnet field (interesting versus robots...), miniaturization and attack bonus.

Sugar Rush has keyboard controls, using the direction keys, Ctrl, Alt and Space for movement, ground/air attacks, and Rush specials. It works quite well, but the 2D fighting moves beg for a nice D-pad. I decided to fire up Total Game Control (a handy key-to-controller mapping software; Google it) and migrate all actions to a Sega Saturn USB pad. It was glorious and beneficial; I defeated several online opponents over ten levels higher than me. As they were bashed by one of the best 2D game controllers ever conceived, my respect for Sugar Rush's responsive and splendidly animated action continued to grow—regardless of input type. PS: I'll be after them to add built-in controller detection before launch. It's a good option to have.

You can sign up for the game now at sugarrush.nexon.net. It's free, it plays great, your fighter is highly customizable, and you can invite all your friends to play. Even low spec users can handle Sugar Rush's vibrant 2D graphics and frenzied battle sounds. Now a word with Ryan McArthur, the associate producer of Sugar Rush...

Interview

Ryan McArthur, Associate Producer, Nexon America

play: Players might recognize Sugar Rush's awesome art style, as your chief character artist has worked on some well known network cartoons. Who is this genius Jeff Agala, and how did he get involved with Sugar Rush?

Ryan: Jeff Agala is the Creative Director for Sugar Rush. He was the director of *Atomic Betty* for Cartoon Network and Teletoon. He has also worked on other animated TV series, including *Total Drama Island*, *Ying Yang Yo*, *Wayside* and *Captain Flamingo*. Jeff is the Creative Director for Klei Entertainment and has been involved in Sugar Rush since its inception, working closely with Klei CEO Jamie Cheng on the initial pitch and concept.

Are there benefits to grouping in Sugar Rush, and will you have team-based trophies?

The game is designed to be enjoyed with friends; you'll appreciate the game is just more fun when playing with a group of friends. In the Robot Rumble game mode, the more difficult levels are much harder to play by yourself, so it really benefits players to work together and play as a team. We haven't launched any of the team-based achievements yet but are definitely working at it.

How extensive will your Ranking system be, and will players have access to character profiles outside the game?

Ranking systems are a big part of online games. It's one of the pieces which constantly grow and really allow players to build a connection to their character and the community. Plus, we think the striking art style will really create a desire for players to share their customized avatars beyond the game. We can't say when we'll deliver these features, but as you can see with any Nexon gaming experience, these out-of-game interactions are a big part of the appeal. We're planning to have game rankings as part of our website offerings. We haven't fully fleshed this out but we're going to deliver it in a fun, Sugar Rush type of way.

What's the max character level, and can you unlock a more specialized version of an archetype while leveling up? Or will you simply acquire more powerful skills for a chosen class?

The game currently maxes out at Level 50 for the closed beta. We're working on a few systems which would allow players to become more specialized, but we don't want to get too deep into the details because it would ruin the fun for players coming back for open beta! We want to give players the chance to expand and personalize their characters and build on the experience gained through playing the game. Tying people to their in-game character is a huge element in all Nexon games and it's become very important in anything we do with Sugar Rush.

"...you'll appreciate the game is just more fun when playing with a group of friends."

Ryan McArthur, Associate Producer
Nexon America





Ask Alienware

030 | 01_09

In our first edition of 2009 we answer the age old question: more memory or faster memory? We also discuss the benefits of early DirectX 10.1 adoption, backwards compatibility in Shader Models, and the perks of gaming grade PC peripherals.

q. What's better for modern PC gaming, more RAM, or faster RAM? And don't say "more faster RAM" □ I mean am I better off with 2 gigs of really top-line low latency RAM, or a big chunk of slightly slower 4GB? Have to ask about 64-bit too, as I might install Ultimate. Would I be better in games with 4GB of faster RAM, or like 8GB of a little slower stuff? I want the most stable and reliable memory config as possible for games, games, games.

Alex, NY



Alienware: Given the choice, we'd go with 8GB of slightly slower memory every time. You will see benefits from using faster memory, but the allocation of additional memory not only to Vista but to supporting other applications outside of the OS as well makes for a more stable system.

q. How relevant is Direct X 10.1 support? I'm shopping ATI and Nvidia graphics cards and of course I'm thinking about future-proofing. To me it seems like Direct X 10 hasn't even caught on yet. A lot of people still running DX 9 mode in games. When considering features on a new card, how much of a factor is the Direct X 10 or 10.1 spec?

William, CA

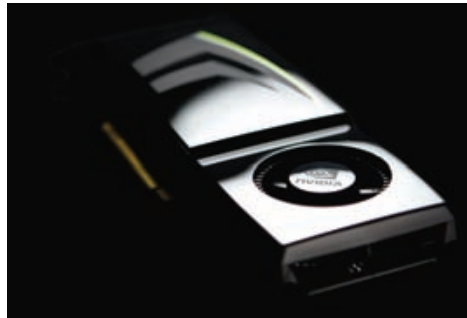
Alienware: If future-proofing your system is a priority, and it's always a priority to us, buying a DirectX 10.1 capable card will deliver higher returns than a DirectX 10 card. The last thing you want is to buy a new GPU now only to replace it six months later so you can play your new favorite title at max settings.



q. When you read the recommended system specifications on PC games now, it seems like the entire baseline standard has shifted to a Shader Model 3.0 minimum. But the best new graphics cards already have SM 4.0 architectures. Are they

simply 'backwards compatible' with SM 3.0? Or does the Shader Model 4 pipeline provide even better/faster SM 3.0 rendering?

Todd, WA



Alienware: If you have Shader Model 4.0 architecture on a new video card, it will be backwards compatible and you should see an improvement in Shader Model 3.0 rendering, both in terms of speed and quality.



q. Besides the extra buttons and lighting, what really makes a gaming keyboard better? Are the materials actually tougher to handle the rough gamer handling compared to normal users? For example, are the WASD keys reinforced? I've been doing OK with cheap generic mice and keyboards, but I've killed a few and I'm thinking about stepping up. Also, how flexible are keyboard macros systems, and is this stuff legal? I.e., could I make long macros in MMORPGs for stuff like item crafting?

Chris, FL



Alienware: Buying a keyboard, in the end, comes down to two things: personal taste and comfort. Build quality for gaming keyboards tends to be superior to support extended and sometimes aggressive use, but the benefits come mainly from features like macros, LCDs and backlit keys. As far as how long the macros can be, it all depends on the brand of the keyboard. All you're doing is telling the keyboard to replace pushing a series of button in a particular sequence with pushing a single button. Some keyboards will support longer sequences than others. Your opponents in the game may call it an unfair advantage, but that's only because they don't like losing to you.



"Your opponents in the game may call it an unfair advantage, but that's only because they don't like losing to you."



If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts, regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bit rates and firewalls, send it along to askalienware@playmagazine.com. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free one-year subscription, so don't be shy!

Please visit us at www.alienware.com/ask to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest products.



Perfect World unearths The Lost Empire

Preferred by many as the ultimate free-to-play alternative to games like Lineage 2 and Aion, Perfect World International (the westernized version of the multi-million-user Korean hit) is bolstering its extensive content with a free expansion in December. Dubbed The Lost Empire, the expansion puts the spotlight events 1,000 years in the past during the era of a tyrannical king. Players will be tasked with assembling the Chrono Wheel to travel back in time and fight with or against the dark armies.

The Lost Empire introduces four new dungeon environments: the Valley of the Scarred, a legendary battlefield stained by the blood of a dozen wars; Unicorn Forest, site of the brutal slaughter of sacred creatures; Old Moonshade Desert, where the empire's princess was once imprisoned; and the ancient version of the floating city of Heaven's Tear, where secrets of the Wraith's origins are revealed.

Whether fighting in the present or past, the expansion will provide all new skills for every class, from the Venomancer's Myriad Rainbow, which sends a swarm of scarabs to poison your foe, to the Blademaster's Bolt of Tyreseus, a powerful area-of-effect blast that damages, snares and reduces attack speed.

Perfect World is perhaps best known for its elaborate pet and mount system. Players can ride



and fly everything from armored raptors, tigers and wolves to flying swords, carpets, giant mantas and two-headed drakes. The Lost Empire expansion promises many new mounts and pets, both decorative and battle-oriented, for those willing to crawl through catacombs and recover relics. Try Perfect World for free today at www.perfectworld.com.

zOMG! Like, totally

Despite the game's dubious title, Gaia Online's zOMG! has proven to be a delightful browser-based casual RPG during our hands-on gameplay in the beta. It's the kind of game your ancient laptop can run flawlessly, and since it plays through a browser you'll be able to fire it up at work or school—not that we're encouraging such activity. Then again, millions have perfected the art of alt-tabbing to World of Warcraft in the middle of a busy work day...

The world of Gaia is experiencing a problem with "the Animated"—entities that bring inanimate objects like trash cans and alarm clocks to life. G-Corp and its billionaire CEO Johnny Gambino have started to offer enchanted rings to qualified individuals in a worldwide effort to eliminate the aggressive Animated. As you can see in the screenshots, zOMG! emphasizes cute, Manga-inspired character sprites and detailed 2D backgrounds across the towns, ports, sewers, ranches and harbors of Gaia. You navigate the world using familiar WASD movement and click interactions, fighting various creatures and Animated objects using combinations of charged-up ring magic.

Despite its fairly simple presentation, zOMG! oozes



charm. The game's NPC dialogue is filled with warmth and humor, quests are fast and fun, customizable player housing is always welcome, and the ring concept represents an addictive and flexible advancement system. We'd be remiss if we didn't highlight the game's thoughtful and atmospheric soundtrack, the work of acclaimed RPG maestro (Oblivion, Guild Wars) Jeremy Soule and his DirectSong production team. The www.gaiaonline.com site is currently accepting more beta applications in preparation for the game's early '09 release, so if you're looking for a lightweight browser-based RPG diversion, zOMG! dude, check it out.



January 2009

Top-Selling PC Titles October 2008

01	Fallout 3	Bethesda Softworks
02	Spore	Electronic Arts
03	Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3	Electronic Arts
04	World Of Warcraft: Battle Chest	Vivendi Universal
05	Far Cry 2	Ubisoft
06	The Sims 2 Double Deluxe	Electronic Arts
07	The Sims 2 Apartment Life Expansion	Electronic Arts
08	Nancy Drew: The Haunting of Castle Malloy	Her Interactive
09	Crysis: Warhead	Electronic Arts
10	World of Warcraft	Vivendi Universal

Fallout 3



Far Cry 2

Fatal1ty Makes His Mark on OCZ's Famed Power Supplies

It's no secret that pros have to play with the best to be the best. Once their stardom allows them to speak for their community, the result is an unparalleled mind-melding between the pros and the product-makers. Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods...and the eSports' equivalent, "Fatal1ty," seek out the best products and make them their own with added performance enhancements, eye-catching aesthetics, and a style all their own.

Johnathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel, 12-time World champion, sought out OCZ to create a power solution to meet the specific needs of fellow gamers. As a leading power supply manufacturer, OCZ has been a top choice for enthusiasts who need ultra-reliable, pristine power for their systems. Johnathan takes a moment to talk about the project:



Why did you choose to team up with OCZ on this project?
OCZ makes world-class PSUs and was one of the first companies to create enthusiast-grade products for gamers. I wanted to work with the best in order to create a power supply that wouldn't let even the most hard-core gamers down.

What impact did you have on the design and development of the power supplies?
OCZ relied on my opinion to get the best feedback from a gamer's perspective. These power supplies are designed specifically for gamers to power their performance rigs and ultimately help them excel in competitions. I put my seal of approval on these PSUs because we developed them to be extremely energy-efficient, power the latest graphics cards, and feature unprecedented stability. Fatal1ty

Gaming Gear products are meant for professional-level gaming and I make sure a product is good enough to compete at the highest level.

How do Fatal1ty products differ from other so-called gamer-friendly products?
Other companies say they are gamer-centric but they are not gamers themselves. This is why I started my own company and partnered with OCZ. Other companies are just suits taking advantage of gamers. My input on a product means that I can vouch for its use in professional competitive environments.

And most importantly, what PC games do you play these days?
Quake Live, Team Fortress 2 and Call of Duty: World at War.

The new Fatal1ty power supply series comes in 400W, 550W modular, and 700W. Send your name and address to contest@ocztechnology.com to win a 700W signed by Fatal1ty himself!

OCZ Technology, an expert in tweaking and squeezing every ounce of performance out of RAM, has been a leader in the memory market since 2002. Founded by gamers for gamers, OCZ has since been on a mission to deliver the very best PC gaming products to the masses.

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The dawn of the 18th century brought about some of history's greatest political upheaval. Empires crumbled as new empires rose from the dust. Empire: Total War allows you to rewrite history and set yourself up as the dominant power in the world. Choose from one of the great factions of the era, including Brittan, Spain, France, Prussia and dozens more, and set out to conquer the globe through deliberate manipulation of military power, trade, religion and even unsavory and clandestine tactics such as assassination and espionage. Establish provinces and colonies in an effort to gain land, riches and influence across Europe, the Americas and the East Indies.

Empire: Total War utilizes both real-time tactics and turn-based strategy to capture true 18th century warfare and empire building. Historical advancements such as the addition of the cannon and musket combine with a refined UI to add new dimensions to the Total War series, including the series' first-ever opportunity for commanding real-time, 3D naval battles. In the heat of combat, any lag could mean the loss of an armada, ground force or vital town. Fortunately, Alienware computers go into battle armed with Intel® Core™ i7 multi-core processors for split-second computations. In warfare, the well-equipped army has the advantage. In Empire: Total War, that's the army commanded by an Alienware.



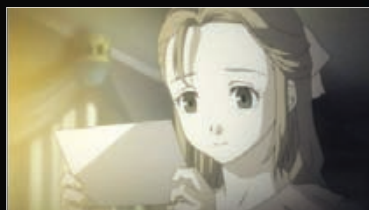
Alienware recommends Windows Vista® Ultimate.



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Conquer with Alienware, by visiting:

www.alienware.com/empiretotalwar



Baccano!

Crazed and Confused

words Bill Gray

"...you'll be just as curious as I am to see where this train is going."

The opening credits of *Baccano*, FUNimation's latest big-budget (okay, *modest-budget*) anime title superimpose the names of the multiple main characters over a freeze-frame picture. Seeing all of these characters flash across the screen, it made me worry that the producers felt the need to give us a "cheat sheet" so we could follow all of what was going on.

It didn't help—at least not in the first episode.

But, here's the funny thing. The more shows I watched, the more I got hooked on the series. And when I finished off the fourth episode FUNi sent me, I was curiously disappointed that it was over, especially after that first mishmash of an episode. I *still* haven't figured *Baccano!* out, but at least I'm enjoying the process now.

The narrative structure of *Baccano!* is best described as "confused." Told in a series of episodic flashbacks from varying points of view, it describes a strange incident that took place in the 1930s on a train called "The Flying Pussyfoot." But that's not all—*Baccano!*

is also about the mafia, prohibition, the search for a missing gangster, vampires, clueless bank robbers, and a mysterious elixir that grants seeming immortality. Each of the multiple characters is involved somehow in these events, whatever they are. And they're all unique, particularly the sunny bank robbers Issac and Miria, who provide most of the comic relief; Ladd, the cheerfully sociopathic hitman; and Jacuzzi, the credulous and panicky teenager. One complaint—the FUNi dub, while giving the characters convincing 1930s Brooklyn accents, makes certain ones sound remarkably similar, adding to the confusion.

Thankfully, the writers manage to weave these people and events together so that even though you might not know what's going on, you get the impression that it's tremendously important. And the animation quality and consistency matches the writing, weaving authentic-looking 1930s New York backgrounds with generally fluid character motion, even though the facial expressions tend toward the wooden side.

The show also comes packed with all sorts of

action, so that even when you're trying to wrap your head around the latest cryptic conversation between the police and the FBI, or two mafia members, you'll know that you won't have long to wait before some sort of fight, gun battle, or altercation occurs. The madcap and scattershot pacing really hurt the show, at least this early in the series—here's hoping there's a good reason for the disjointed story. But after the first couple of episodes, you'll be just as curious as I am to see where this train is going.

parting shot

Baccano is a twisted, twisting tale—I don't know what it's all about yet. But I do know that I'm going to enjoy finding out.

Not a pretty sight.





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デスノート Death Note Box Set

Might Makes Light

words Bill Gray

Boy, there have been plenty of great box sets being released lately. From *Le Chevalier D'Aeon*, to *Ergo Proxy*, to *Coyote Ragtime Show*—all of the great anime series of 2007 are finally being made into affordable collections. The best ones, such as Viz's *Death Note*, come loaded with scads of extras, tempting even the fan with all the DVDs into yet another purchase. And if you haven't seen the series yet, it's time to start watching.

Death Note, in case you missed it, revolves around questions of justice and morality, power and control. One day, high school student Light Yagami finds a notebook that kills whoever's name is written in it. By executing every criminal he can find, Light plans to establish a new world order, where the guilty (in his estimation) are punished with death, leaving the innocent free to live without fear. One problem—in taking it upon himself to kill the guilty, Light becomes every bit as evil as the criminals he kills. Can his admittedly noble ends possibly justify the monstrous means?

When the police realize what's happening, they bring in the world's greatest detective, Batma—oh, I mean "L," who quickly closes in on Light. The two wage an enormously entertaining battle of wits, with life and death at stake. This is the heart of the series, and where it shines from a storytelling standpoint. *Death Note* manages to create a complex and engaging tale that never loses its way, despite all the twists and turns Light and L take.

Supporting the tautly written story is detailed, fluid animation that brings life to the characters from the manga on which it's based. The suitably atmospheric, gothic score complements the action well. Finally, the English dubbing is serviceable, though purists like me also have the option of watching it subbed. Viz's latest box set is the best way to experience *Death Note*, with the bonus content such as creator interviews and audio commentaries being icing on an already sweet cake.

parting shot



If you are an anime fan, you owe it to yourself to experience *Death Note*, especially now that you can watch the entire series, plus extra content, for a reasonable price.



"Light becomes every bit as evil as the criminals he kills. Can his admittedly noble ends possibly justify the monstrous means?"



Coyote Ragtime Show

As in Wile E.

Short. Too short. That's my main knock on Coyote Ragtime Show, and it's a minor one. At just 12 episodes, CRS has half of the running time of, say, Ergo Proxy, or roughly 1/1,000th the running time of Dragon-ball Z. That's a shame, because for those shining 300 minutes, you get treated to a slick, well-plotted sci-fi anime with attitude and action to spare.

FUNi's thinpak box set collects all 12 episodes, rescuing the series from the clutches of struggling ADV. Now you can watch Mister, Franca, and the rest of the crew (known as "Coyotes") blaze across the universe to find the greatest buried treasure in the galaxy. It's a simple plan, with two problems. One, the planet where the treasure is hidden, Graceland, will be destroyed in five days. And two, a powerful crime boss and her 12 killer loli-goth androids are out for Mister's blood—and the treasure too.

It was impossible for me to watch the series again and not compare it to another well-produced sci-fi anime, Cowboy Bebop, one of my favorites of all time. Though Coyote doesn't match the depth and gravitas achieved by some of Bebop's best episodes, it more than a match for its production values and action sequences. Also like Bebop, the show was over much more quickly than I would have liked. **Bill Gray**



parting shot

I wish there were more show to this Show, but what's here is top-notch.



Shigurui

Gory and Honor

It's one of the most disgusting scenes I've seen in an anime—a samurai, kneeling before the Shogun, reaches into his own guts and pulls out lengths of his own small intestine. He's trying to make a point, that the tournament to the death between samurai sanctioned by his lord is a terrible, bloodthirsty waste. *Shigurui* begins with this, setting the tone for this darkly compelling anime.

The tournament is the vehicle for a battle between Gennosuke Fujiki, a man with one arm, and Seigen Irako, a blind cripple. From there, *Shigurui* flashes back to Fujiki's time studying under one of Japan's greatest swordmasters, Kogan, and the first time Irako wormed his way into the dojo. In the flashback, both young men are healthy and whole, and it's *Shigurui's* task to show us, in gory, anatomical detail, the bitter, agonizing road the two samurai travel to face each other in the Shogun's death tournament.

Animated brilliantly by Madhouse, the studio behind *Ninja Scroll* and *Trigun*, *Shigurui* takes its time, lingering on the characters' expressive faces and giving the viewer space to breathe. You'll need it, because the intense action will sometimes take your breath away—at least it did mine. *Shigurui* is a fascinating study in character, tightly-controlled but powerful emotions, and violence. It takes you back to a time when honor was valued above everything, even life itself. **Bill Gray**

"[Shigurui] takes you back to a time when honor was valued above everything..."

parting shot

You'll cringe, you'll gag, you'll hide your eyes—but you'll definitely remember *Shigurui*. Highly recommended.

Gyroxus full-motion gaming chair

What makes this Gyroxus gaming chair so utterly unique is that it becomes the actual left analog stick on a PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360 game. Usually chairs employ some sort of hydraulic system or vibration gimmick, but here you are suspended on a powerless track that follows your gyrating movement and translates it to the analog. The chair takes getting used to, and it's really not what you want to take to a first-person shooter competition, but it's a kick when you can enjoy long, sweeping movements in a flying game like *Blazing Angels*. Good workout too. www.gyroxus.com



Dual Glow Sabers

Look, you probably don't need the Dual Glow Sabers for anything beyond party amusement, but they do server their purpose: what self-respecting Star Wars fan wouldn't want to play their favorite Star Wars game with sweeping glowing sword gestures?

Mana Energy Potion energy shots

Looking for a powerful jolt of energy for that long WoW session? Visit your local Fry's or Hot Topic and loot a few Mana Energy Potions. This sugar-free blue liquid comes in a cool golf ball-sized bottle that looks like a mana potion from your favorite RPG. One bottle will provide +160 mana—in real-life terms that's the caffeine equivalent of two cans of Red Bull in a gentle vitamin-enhanced mix, with five to eight hours of smooth, jitter-free energy and no aftercrash. This stuff *really* works. Just don't exceed two bottles a day if you plan on sleeping at some point! www.manapotions.com



Numark TTi Turntable

Now that CDs are old news, vinyl records are ancient. Ever think about transferring your analog music to your iPod? It's a bit of a stretch—you could argue simply buying the CD copy for a cleaner transfer makes sense for some—but the Numark TTi recording device is actually a slick little novelty and may actually be practical for anyone with a big vinyl collection. It's basically a plug-and-record transfer device from the vinyl straight to the iPod (no need for a computer).



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The Warrior

Studio: Mondo Macabro Genre: Action/Exploitation Release Date: November 18, 2008

Say what you will about Indonesian action star Barry Prima's acting (wooden) or fighting technique (ditto), but the man can take an on-screen beating. In this jaw-dropping 1981 blend of period drama and sword and sorcery pic, Prima is Jaka Sembung, who fights tirelessly against the cruelties of the colonial Dutch. The latter spare no quarter in heaping unholy abuse on him, which ranges from crucifixion to blinding, but Jaka emerges each time as square-jawed and defiant as ever. A secret weapon is produced in the form of an undead mystic whose can re-attach lopped-off limbs, and the resulting showdown between Jaka and the magician is an orgy of rubbery body parts, low-budget wirework and gallons of gore that suggests a cross between early Hong Kong action-horror hybrids like *Black Magic* and an enthusiastic children's theater production of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Mondo Macabro gives the Criterion treatment to *The Warrior*, with extensive program notes, interviews with the producer and screenwriter, and the highly caffeinated theatrical trailer. **Paul Gaita**



The World Sinks...Except Japan

Studio: Synapse Films Genre: Comedy/Science Fiction Release Date: November 18, 2008

Cult filmmaker Minoru Kawasaki, the self-described "Ed Wood of Japan," offers his own unique take on the global warming issue with *The World Sinks... Except Japan*. The outlandish plot—melting ice caps and seismic shifts submerge everything on the planet save for Japan—seems at first to serve as a broad swipe at disaster movie clichés, but when the survivors swarm the tiny country and make life miserable with their boorish foreign attitudes, it becomes evident that Kawasaki's real target is the Ugly Outsider. To be fair, he throws a few haymakers at his own country, the best of which is a clip from a giant monster movie in which all the victims are Americans. For the most part, he is content to lob softball gags about rude Yanks, obsequious Chinese, double-crossing Koreans, vain Hollywood types, and sex-crazy presidents. Kawasaki's made more outrageous comedies —*Executive Koala* (also from Synapse) and *Calamari Wrestler*, to name just two—so one might be more rewarded by his offbeat vision elsewhere. The DVD includes commentary by Kawasaki and a making-of featurette. **Paul Gaita**



"...offers his own unique take on the global warming issue..."

42nd Street Forever Volume 4: Cooled by Refrigeration

Studio: Synapse Films Genre: Exploitation Availability: January 27, 2009

The humble exploitation trailer compilation, long the audio-visual component of many a beer-and-bong-driven Friday night for grindhouse types, enters the digital age courtesy Synapse Films' 42nd Street Forever DVD series, which bundles some of the rarest and raunchiest coming attractions from the '70s and '80s. All the grimy colors of the trashfilm world are represented here, from dubbed Euro imports (Yor: *The Hunter from the Future*) to backyard efforts like the shaggy Bigfoot story *The Legend of Boggy Creek*. Stars in various states of decline are also in heavy rotation here, from Lee Marvin and Richard Burton in *The Klansman* (with O.J. Simpson) and Jack Palance and Martin Landau, decades away from their Oscars, in the *Predator*-esque *It Came Without Warning*. The 90-minutes-plus of spots offer enough concentrated sex and violence to satisfy nostalgists and newcomers alike, and the commentary by Fangoria's Michael Gingold, Chris Poggiali and Edwin Samuelson provides plenty of detail on these films' sordid inceptions. **Paul Gaita**



Shogun Assassin 5-Disc Collector's Set

Studio: AnimEigo Genre: Action Avail: Nov 18, 2008

A favorite with both the grindhouse and hip-hop faithful for its gore-soaked samurai mayhem and doomy pronouncements about honor and vengeance, 1980's *Shogun Assassin* was actually a re-edit of two films from the manga-inspired *Lone Wolf and Cub* series (1972-1974). Although the original Japanese versions have since been released on DVD, the composite's lean pacing and eminently quotable dialogue ("I AM THE SUPREME NINJA!") have retained its own fanbase, which includes Quentin Tarantino (natch) and Samuel L. Jackson. To satiate that demographic, AnimEigo has created new editions of the remaining four *Lone Wolf* features, which retain the original film prints but replace the vocal track with an equally pulpy English language dub. Purists may decry the dubbing, which rings as leaden as any *Godzilla* movie, but the visuals are still so spectacular (and spectacularly violent) that only the most uptight Asian cinephile would refuse a viewing. The five-disc Collector's Set compiles *Shogun Assassin* with their four new editions, and packages them with essays, commentary and AnimEigo's typically exhaustive liner notes. **Paul Gaita**

SHOGUN ASSASSIN



5-FILM COLLECTOR'S SET

"...bundles some of the rarest and raunchiest coming attractions from the '70s and '80s."

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The screenshot displays the play.online website, which is the official site of play magazine. The header includes the play.online logo and navigation links for home, games, anime, japan, media, contests, staff, about us, contact us, subscribe, and newsletter. A play.forums banner is also present. The main content area features a 'play.news' section with a 'Breed' game preview, a 'shop.digital' section for digital content, and a 'feature story' about Capcom's new characters. A 'recent content' section lists various articles and game reviews, including 'Princess and Knight', 'Halloween Anime Recommendations', and 'Legacy of Ys'. A 'play.contests' section is also visible, featuring a 'Sorry!' contest. On the right side, there are banners for 'girls of gaming' and a 'special digital bundle' for 'girls of gaming 5.5'.

BACK OF THE BOOK

01_09 HEATHER ANNE CAMPBELL
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Blah, blah, blah



Too Many Games, man. Like, way too many.

“It only takes two hours to watch a movie, and most of the time each movie gets its own weekend. If it takes twenty hours to finish a game, each game should get its own month.”

So, hey, uh, games people. Stop releasing all of your games during the last two months of the year. You're cannibalizing sales, and the market is not the stronger for it. You know how movie studios stagger their tent-poles? You guys really should look into this. I've heard it works so good that movies are, like, a big deal now.

Sure, rarely do several giant games launch on the same day . . . but when you consider that most games run about ten to fifteen hours (or, if you're *Fallout 3*, a hundred hours), then you're essentially putting out your flagship titles on the same Friday. It only takes two hours to watch a movie, and most of the time each movie gets its own weekend. If it takes twenty hours to finish a game, each game should get its own *month*.

I'm looking at a stack of games here that is totally insane, man. *Little Big Planet*, *Mirror's Edge*, *Fallout 3*, *Gears of War 2*, and *Left 4 Dead* are all in the same bag. It's a plastic bag. If I were a normal gamer, as opposed to the enthusiast/journalist that I am, I probably would have purchased *just one* of these titles . . . because I wouldn't have had time for the others. Wouldn't have needed a bag, then.

In fact, there are games that *aren't* in this bag because there are already so many games *in* this bag. When am I going to get a chance to putter around again in *Last Remnant*? Am I going to replay *Fallout 3* as a villain? God, I'm not even done with *Mother 3*! Speed running *Megaman 9*? Not going to happen, man!

I understand that every game wants to be the **big game of the holiday season**, but does anyone remember, uh, *Halo 3* and *GTA IV*? They weren't released during Christmas, for crying out candy. And they sold *every copy ever made*. You can't *buy* those games anymore! They already sold *all* of them. You have to borrow a copy from a friend now, or drug him and play it on his tv. Put the drug in his egg nog, man. That stuff is thick enough to hide anything. You can hide rolls of quarters in egg nog. I've *done* it.

Like, *Little Big Planet* is such a springtime game, man. You could totally release it in May and it would sell systems. People have birthdays in the spring, you know. They'll be done with their Christmas games and want something new. *Little Big Planet* could have pushed a

springtime surge. Instead, it's all bunched up with all these other games, like food in a drain. It's unappetizing. I really don't want to eat any of the food that's clogged in that drain. There's a restaurant opening in February called *Street Fighter IV*. I'll just wait to eat there.

Not to mention, when you shove a game down someone's throat when they're still swallowing the last game they bought, they don't relish all the choices you made when you were designing it. Like those geese that become foie gras, man. You *seen* those pictures? That stuff is crazy. Geese with pipes down their throats. Us players? We're gaming geese. That pipeline? It's Christmas.

Man, that's why I'm a vegan.

Why are these companies trying to fatten us up? Are they going to slaughter us and serve our livers at the next E3? Man, everyone needs to chill out already.

Like, wouldn't it be great if *Mirror's Edge* had come out mid-January? That game is so *winter*. All cold and stoic and stuff. Check out--hey man, I'm talking to you—check out those buildings. Those buildings are big icy blocks. They're igloos with windows. I can't play that game without getting cold. That's totally a January game right there. I'm surprised it doesn't come as a pack-in title when you purchase a space-heater. Play that game with a white Dualshock, and it's like you're holding a rumbling snow-cone. Gotta drink some hot chocolate to play that game, man. *Mirror's Edge*. Pssh. Should have called it, I dunno, like *Running Winter Game* or something.

I can totally get releasing *Gears of War 2* during the run-up to the holidays, because it's a fall game, right? Like, it's all about the *fall* of man, and stuff. I mean, yeah, there's a few other games about that idea, but *Gears of War* is all, like, epic autumn. Still, when I see screen-shots of that game, I can't help thinking that most movies that look like that—big guns and stuff—those are summer releases. *Gears of War* could have come out in June or July or something. You know, whenever the month after *Grand Theft Auto IV* was.

How can a human being possibly play *Chrono Trigger DS* and *Prince of Persia* at the same time? We can't! Like, if you want to play both of those games at the same time, you've got to get your dog to hold a controller. That ain't happening! Dogs like

to run, they don't like nudging a stylus. Not to mention, dogs are probably better at playing Wii games.

The point I'm trying to make here is that gamers need a chance to play games. Like, maybe the quality of games across the board is suffering because all these programming dudes are sitting at their desks, drinking Mountain Dew like they were Daniel Johnston, and they're thinking, "What's the point of thinking up a different way to hide ammo? Nobody's gonna play this game for more than an hour, because it's coming out the same day as a thousand other games. I'll just put the ammo in a barrel, man. Hell, I'll put some *experience* in a barrel, too." Maybe I'm wrong about that. Maybe game developers work in offices where everything comes from barrels and crates. Maybe that's how corporations get deliveries—every night, the cleaning staff hides the next day's supplies in big rotating treasure chests. You know: "Man, I need a new stack of Post-It notes. I'll just head to the hallway and see what I can smash with my fists. There's bound to be a Post-It somewhere."

If I had to put my money on it, though—and I've got so much money to put on this, you know, like *six whole dollars*, man—I'd say that all of us would be better off—developers and gamers and PR teams and everything—if we had games spread out through the whole year. Like, can you imagine an April where games were like, coming out? *Big April this year*, we'd say to each other.

Instead, I've got to load games into an automatic baseball pitcher, and fire them at my PS3 and 360. You wouldn't believe the modding that took. My PS3 has like, a big funnel attached to the front for catching disks, and they blast through the system and shoot out the other side. They're on screen for like, all of two seconds. I've made it so the entire content of a Blu-Ray shrieks out as an uncompressed audio file. It sounds like an airplane piloted by a jackhammer. It scares the hell out of my dog. He usually drops his stylus.

Wait, what? That's not my dog? Whose dog is that, man? Ah, hell with it. You want some leftover Christmas Crunch? It's been in that bowl for like, three days, I think.

—The Hoodie-Wearing Gamer
Known as "Lotto"

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